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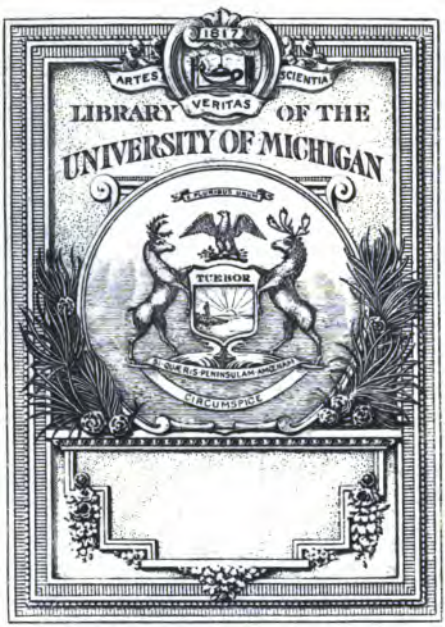
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THE UNDYING PAST

By the Same Author

REGINA: OR THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

Translated by

BEATRICE MARSHALL

Crown 8vo. Third Edition.

THE UNDYING PAST

BY

HERMANN SUDERMANN

TRANSLATED BY
BEATRICE MARSHALL

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THE UNDYING PAST

I

THE mid-day sun beat fiercely on the much-trodden square in front of a provincial railway station. The old white mare nodded drowsily between the shafts of the yellow mailcart which rattled down from the little town to meet every train. Two or three hotel omnibuses, painted brownish-grey, with mud-splashed wheels, also came clattering down the dusty boulevard, at the other end of which rose two stucco towers with their vanes piercing the deep blue of the July sky.

A clanging bell had already signalled the train's departure from the neighbouring station. The station-master put on his red cap, the barmaid began to wipe with a duster the glass case protecting the cheese and other viands, and a couple of postmen crunched over the gravel, wheeling trucks containing letter-bags and parcels.

"Not a single soul inside again," grumbled the restaurant-manager through the waiting-room window, as he watched the hotel omnibus drive up. "What is the use of keeping beer cool if nobody comes to drink it?"

The barmaid nodded meditatively as she flicked the flies from a pile of stale rusks.

Then there came in sight, dashing along the boulevard, an open landau drawn by a pair of spirited bays.

The restaurant-host's face brightened. "The party from Stolten Court!" exclaimed he, seizing his cap. "The young gentlemen's leave is over, then."

The carriage steered clear of waiting passengers with a sweeping curve as it bowled up to the station stairs.

One of the young cuirassier officers who occupied the back seat of the carriage pulled himself slowly erect, and, in all his fair-haired splendour, climbed out, pushing aside with a brusque movement the restaurant-manager, who had officiously thought it necessary to

tender his services. The other youth, equally gigantic and fair-haired, and perhaps a trifle more phlegmatic, followed. They threw open on either side the carriage doors, and, with an action of the arm that seemed borrowed from a Court quadrille, assisted the stupendous female form sitting on the front seat of the carriage to alight.

With swelling bosom and wide-spreading hips, her fat hands imprisoned in new light kid gloves, her grey gauze veil thrown back, displaying a snub nose, the lady calmly descended, with a glance over her shoulder of somewhat sharp disapproval at the old gentleman who followed her.

"Leave me alone, boys," he snapped, when his sons would have helped him too. "Your broken-down old father is still able to help himself."

He threw off his dust-coat on the seat behind him, and with an elastic bound sprang down without touching the carriage steps. He stood there, a dapper figure in his short, elegantly cut coat, his little eyes twinkling with self-satisfaction out of a face lined from fast living, the cheeks of which hung down on either side of an aggressively curled-up grey moustache. He had to look up to his wife and sons, who were all more than a head taller than himself.

The party entered the small waiting-room reserved for first-class passengers, which, besides two bare polished tables, and portraits in lithograph, veiled in green gauze, of the county nobility and gentry, boasted nothing but apparatuses for the annihilation of flies; which consisted of a glass bottle full of soapy water, two plates containing poisoned paper, and a few glasses covered with brandy-soaked bread bored with holes. Within and around these traps revolved hundreds of half-drowned and poisoned flies in their last death-struggle.

The host of the restaurant offered his refreshments to the "Herr Baron"—Königsberg beer or tea, also an incomparably fine brew of lemonade, were to be had. Herr von Stolt ordered beer, and sent his sons out to look after their luggage.

They closed the door behind them as they took their leave, and disappeared in the direction of the buffet, where they were soon heard chaffing the barmaid.

"Thank God that they are going away," said the lady, with a sigh, loosening her violet hat-strings, from which a broad double chin billowed forth awe-inspiringly. "It is high time."

Her spouse suppressed a smile, and then asked, "Why?"

"Have you seen anything of either of them between meal-times during the last fortnight?" she answered with another question.

"Now, now, it is not so bad as all that," repeated he; "but, as you say, they were certainly out a good deal."

"And where did they go? That is the point."

"Well, where should they go? To the Prussian Crown, or

some such resort, to drink a little champagne and amuse themselves with the girls. I did the same when I was their age."

"And you aren't much better now."

"Really—I must protest, Malwine."

She drew herself up and measured him from head to foot with the compassionate glance of a wife to whom marital forgiveness has perforce become a habit.

"We won't drag you into the matter, my dear," she answered. "You know no good can come of it. Neither do I reproach the boys on that score. They are welcome to run after all the girls in the neighbourhood, whether dairymaids or barmaids, to their hearts' content."

"You are very long-suffering, Malwine."

"Certainly I am. But what doesn't please me is that my sons should grow too fond of society women—married women belonging to our own set, too. Königsberg, for two cuirassiers who have inherited money from their father and height from their mother——"

"That I am shorter than you are, dear Malwine," he interrupted, "is a fact that I am weary of hearing you insist on. I will do my best to grow."

"I was going to say," she continued, "that Königsberg is not exactly a paradise of all the virtues—quite the contrary." A maternal sigh escaped her huge billowy bosom. "All the more important, therefore, that home should remain for them a purer world. Tell me, what would happen when they begin to regard the circle from which I shall one day choose for them wives with critical eyes? And why? Because there are creatures in it who have no idea of maintaining their dignity in associating with young men."

"Upon my word, I don't know what you are driving at," Herr von Stolt said, and gazed intently at the toes of his riding-boots.

"Why feign to be ignorant," answered his wife. "You know perfectly well the person I mean, being as intimate with her as your sons."

"I have long since given up meddling in local scandals, my dear," he said, with a snigger; "but if with all these obscure hints it is Felicitas Kletzingk whom you mean, you are decidedly on the wrong scent. There never was a more guileless little woman. We know what Ulrich is. He is always either spending the day in Berlin or sitting lost in a brown study. And his little wife, of course, will amuse herself."

Frau von Stolt broke into a harsh laugh.

"Of course; now let us hear the old category of her perfections. She is an angel—on that point all the men within a circuit of ten miles are agreed. She is so ingenuous and so melancholy; so talented and so good; so gentle, and, in short, a

paragon. But we women see deeper, my friend. We are not to be taken in by any wiles, flute-like tones, and smiling fawn-like eyes. Then for us, truly, there lies behind it all no temptation to appropriate what is not our own."

"Malwine, you are becoming insulting," retorted Herr von Stolt, twirling the ends of his grey moustache with an injured air.

"If only there were something in her!" the lady exclaimed, undaunted; "but I assure you she is commonplace to the very core. There is nothing genuine about her. She has her looks, and nothing else. I can't conceive what can have attracted Ulrich with his position and fortune to this person. Rhaden's widow, poor, with a child, and compromised to boot."

"How compromised?"

"Don't be absurd, Alfred," was the reply. "You men have always been of opinion that Rhaden fell in the duel with Sellenthin because there was a case of adultery at the bottom of it."

"Yes, certainly before her second marriage. So much I will admit. But Leo Sellenthin and Ulrich have been friends from childhood, and what friends! Something quite extraordinary, like David and Jonathan. Would Ulrich have married this woman if there had been anything between her and his friend? It stands to reason that there could have been nothing, doesn't it?"

Frau von Stolt relapsed into meditation. Her husband's argument apparently had convinced her.

"But apart from that altogether," she began again, after a pause. "Leo is abroad, and not coming home. What concerns us now is Felicitas Kletzingk's present conduct, and I must say that it almost amounts to a scandal."

Herr von Stolt shrugged his shoulders.

"Here is an example," continued his wife—"just one example. The other morning I had occasion to turn out our sons' pockets."

"So you are in the habit of turning out other people's pockets!" exclaimed Herr Stolt, perceptibly disturbed by the discovery.

"Yes, why not? It is advisable to keep one's self abreast of their little peccadilloes in love as well as professional affairs. And what do you think I found? Letters from Madam Felicitas—small olive-green missives, reeking with that abominable perfume with which she always scents herself."

Herr von Stolt involuntarily sniffed the air, and smiled dreamily as he did so.

"It was my privilege to read through a real—what do you call it?—æsthetic correspondence, as exaggerated as you please, all about noble humanity, moonshine, communion with nature, and other rubbish. Not that there is any question of our good sons being capable of living up to such a silly *rôle*, for though they have an

excellent knowledge of horses, this sort of high-falutin is quite beyond their comprehension, thank God. Besides, I talked to them each separately, and put my emphatic veto upon it."

"And has that done any good?" asked Herr von Stolt, with a grin.

"To a certain extent it has. But of course I could not prevent their actual visits to Felicitas. I don't understand how Ulrich can wink at his wife's intercourse with these young men. Not only our two, but Otzen and Neuhaus, and the second Sembritzy, and a lot more of them are constantly there, all young and green."

"Hum! there are older visitors too, I'm thinking," interposed Herr von Stolt, thoughtfully.

"Yes. There is yourself, for instance."

"Really, Malwine!" he ejaculated reproachfully.

"Dear Alfred, we understand each other."

"When I do happen to ride over to Uhlenfelde, it is to see Ulrich."

"Especially when Ulrich is in the Reichstag?"

The matrimonial recriminations ended abruptly, for at this moment a tall spare masculine figure, in a white dust-coat which hung without a fold, glided past the waiting-room window. It rather resembled a walking towel, on which some one had stuck a head.

"Talk of the devil!" exclaimed Frau Malwine, and jumped up to see whither the passing form had betaken itself.

"Who was it?" asked Herr von Stolt, who was sitting with his back to the window.

"Ulrich von Kletzingk."

The door of the vestibule opened, and he who had gone by came in.

He had a pale sickly face of a reflective cast, with sharp small nose and hollow cheeks, set on narrow shoulders and a long freckled neck. It was framed in a light beard, which hung about it like a ragged fringe. The high, rather receding forehead was furrowed with three perpendicular lines denoting mental fatigue, and it ended in a shock of bristly dark-brown hair standing erect. The most remarkable feature of this intellectual head were the dark brilliant eyes, which shone forth from their blue sockets like torches of energy. After emitting luminous flashes, they seemed to slumber wearily again till a new excitement set them aflame once more.

When he was aware who occupied the room, a shadow of nervous uneasiness descended for a moment on the new-comer's face, but passed quickly away. The tone in which he greeted the husband and wife was moderately friendly, if not cold. His voice was not pleasant to hear. It was shrill and high pitched, and however

rapidly he spoke, the words seemed to be forced with pain and difficulty from his narrow chest.

Frau Malwine beamed. She was no longer the mother of the Gracchi, in which part she had been just posing to her husband. She exhausted herself in expressions of affection for Frau Felicitas, and added the tender reproach that it was ages since she had seen anything of her. Twice when she had been expected, an extra supply of meringues had been baked, of the kind which was the pride of her modest ménage, but Frau Felicitas had not come. Ulrich Kletzingk allowed this outpouring of gush to pass over him quietly. Only the nervous playing with the buttons of his riding-glove betrayed that he was not quite at ease.

"You put us to shame, madame," he answered. "Your friendship, however, has been too unobtrusive, for I think that it is some months since we saw you at Uhlenfelde."

Frau Malwine, a little disconcerted at the reminder that she owed Uhlenfelde a call, nevertheless, in the same strain of affected *naïvété*, went so far as to explain that she was sure she had been well represented by her sons.

Kletzingk bowed and smiled politely.

"At any rate," she continued, with animation, "I ought to express my thanks to you, Herr Baron, for the happy influence the atmosphere of your house has exercised on my young scapegraces. My only fear is that I may have abused your hospitality in sending them over to you nearly every day. I trust that they have always given my kind regards?"

"I believe so, probably." He gazed out of the window. At that moment he longed for nothing more earnestly than to be delivered from this woman's offensive chatter.

Herr von Stolt, who hitherto had been content to smile in his sleeve in cynical enjoyment of his wife's sallies, now joined in the conversation. He inquired after the condition of the crops at Uhlenfelde, and gave a good report of his own. The harvest had been got in satisfactorily on the whole; only the wheat was middling. He left the rest to Providence. "But do tell me, Kletzingk," he said, suddenly taking another tack, "what is up at Halewitz? The rye there is yellow as guineas and still uncut. I could scarcely believe my eyes as we drove by there to-day."

Baron Kletzingk bit his lips, bent his head, and stared silently at the ground.

"I don't mean to reproach you for it, of course," Stolt added hastily; "we all know that you are not responsible for this estate falling into a neglected hell—pardon the expression, Malwine—but our friend has been globe-trotting for four years. In my opinion it is time that he came home."

"I am expecting him now," replied Kletzingk.

The effect of this announcement was stupendous.

Herr von Stolt nearly choked in suppressing a cry of amazement, and his wife bounded up as if she had been shot from a cannon.

"Leo Sellenthin! It is impossible! Coming now by this train?"

"Yes, by this train."

"Where is he coming from?"

"That I don't know, dear madame. My last letter to him was addressed to La Plata."

"And you tell me all this as if it were the simplest thing in the world. Aren't you pleased?"

"How could I be otherwise than delighted?" Kletzingk responded. "With him I lost half myself."

"Ah, to be sure. And, do tell me, Leo and you—the old intimacy exists still?"

"Still, madame, and I hope and trust that it will continue to exist in defiance of anything the world may choose to say."

His eyes rested steadily on her face, while she turned to study a fly-paper with interest.

The two young cuirassier officers rushed in to announce that the train was in sight. When they saw the baron they appeared suddenly abashed. They waited awkwardly till he offered them his hand, and then seized it with somewhat excessive warmth. But Kletzingk was far from paying heed to their manners. It was with an effort that he roused himself sufficiently to bid the old lady and gentleman a courteous farewell.

"I hope Sellenthin will speak to us," called Frau von Stolt after him.

He did not hear. With his long stork-like steps he hurried on to the platform. His breast heaved, and the veins started out in knots on his wide arched temples. He stood there with his clenched fist pressed to his left side, and stared with frightened eyes at the incoming train.

"Uli!" cried a resonant voice in jubilation echoing along the platform, and a blond head was thrust out of one of the carriage windows. Beneath the yellow hair were cheeks tanned to copper hue, a pair of merrily twinkling eyes, and a long flowing beard which the draught from the train swept backwards like a besom.

Frau von Stolt caught hold of her husband's arm. "He has not improved in looks," said she.

"Grown rather wild," he assented.

Four eye-glasses were directed with breathless attention to the two friends as they flew into each other's embrace.

"It was wise of him, after all, to wait till the grass had grown over that affair," went on Frau Malwine.

But Herr von Stolt, as sceptical well-wisher, reserved his opinion. He let his eye-glass fall, made a grimace, and merely muttered—

"Unsavoury story; unsavoury story!"

Then, apparently radiant with joy, he hurried forward to shake the hand of the home-coming neighbour.

II

COOL twilight reigned in the back parlour of the Prussian Crown. The outside shutters were closed, and only one small chink let in the now lessened heat of the sun shining through the green boughs of the limes without, and streaming across the floor in a bar of subdued gold.

In this room for generations any one who was anybody in Münsterberg society, or who, through professional service, had any claim on it at all, had been in the habit of meeting. Besides wealthy landowners and the officers of the Münsterberg cavalry, the justice of the peace, a couple of doctors, and two or three magistrates assembled there nearly every evening for convivial intercourse. It also served as a convenient rendezvous for the wives of the country gentry when they came into the town for shopping, and in the holidays it was the place chosen by their sons wherein to celebrate their "Kneips." On these occasions the door was kept locked and adorned with a placard bearing the words "Closed for cleaning"—a precautionary measure to ensure the rising generation against parental intrusion.

It was here on familiar ground, in the room which had once witnessed the feats in champagne-drinking of "Quartaner" Sellenthin, that the reunited friends came to rest and refresh themselves. While Ulrich Kletzingk, white and exhausted from heat, reclined in the corner of a sofa, his long legs outstretched, the returned traveller, wildly happy, paced up and down between the tables, breathing in greedily the old scent, that he knew so well, of mingled tobacco, leather, and beer.

At first, a thoughtless, almost animal gladness in being together again, deprived them of speech. Their hearts were so full of each other, that they seemed to have nothing to say. Then at last Ulrich opened the conversation with a casual question.

"Did you come by Hamburg?"

Leo came and planted his six feet of massive height in front of his friend.

"Yes. The day before yesterday I set foot on German soil, and went straightway to a restaurant to breakfast. I had a couple of congenial souls from Buenos Ayres with me. They and I went

on breakfasting the whole day and night through, till it was time for breakfast again the next morning."

At this he laughed, showing the whole of his magnificent set of teeth, and rolled his tongue with a clicking sound over his gums. He stood there, straddle-legged, with his hands in his pockets, in the flower of his broad-chested, full-blooded, manly strength. His thick, reddish-blond beard waved back in two semicircles over his firm rounded cheeks, which, like the short nose, might have been moulded in bronze, and then it mingled with the curly moustache in a riot of waving strands, shading from light to dark. The hair at the back of his head was cropped to the roots, and displayed the shape of the powerful skull, which was posed on the ruddy full neck like the copula of a dome.

"And that reminds me," he continued, "that I have had nothing to eat since I left Hamburg. What does it mean? It isn't the way prodigal sons are generally treated. Shall I still have to go hunting for my meat in the saddle now I am in Europe?"

And then he roared through the hollow of his hand. "Landlord! waiter! scullion!" till the walls shook from the echoes of his voice.

The landlord, greasy and smiling, with two old-fashioned Prussian ringlets over his ears, appeared in the doorway. He expressed himself respectfully overjoyed to find that the Herr Baron had not lost his healthy voice in foreign countries. That was a sign the rest was in good condition.

"In such good condition, my friend," replied Leo, "that if you venture again to criticise my voice, you will find yourself being chucked out of one of your own windows."

The landlord, in alarm, begged pardon, and, promising to send up the best contents of his larder, retired with a servile bow.

"To tell you the truth, old fellow," Leo said, turning to his friend, "I don't like your looks. You lay there like one crucified."

Ulrich Kletzingk clenched his teeth, and raised himself into an erect position.

"Thank you," he said, "I am quite revived now."

"What about the heart? How are the attacks now? Who, I should like to know, has been rubbing your head for you all this time when the little white mice swarm?"

Ulrich smiled, as we smile at children's talk which does our heart good to hear.

"How long it seems since I heard your old expressions!" he said, affectionate tenderness bringing a mist before his clear eyes. "Now all I want is to hear you call me 'little girl,' and then I shall feel old times have really come back again."

"I will call you so if you like," Leo replied. "But kindly answer my question."

"Yes. At first my attacks of heart exhaustion were much less frequent; and then, when they were bad, you know, there was my—my wife—although——" He stopped short.

Leo Sellenthin looked at the floor and frowned; his full sensuous lips closed tightly. He nodded two or three times, and muttered—

"Yes, of course. Your wife—your wife."

The landlord brought in the wine. They drank to each other, and clinked glasses, and at the bell-like sound their eyes met. Ulrich stretched his lean freckled hand across the table to his friend in silence, and Leo grasped it with hearty fervour.

"We drink to each other, old boy!" he exclaimed.

Ulrich looked as if he wished to add something, but suppressed it, and then repeated, "To each other."

"And that all may be the same as ever between us?"

"And that all may be the same as ever."

Leo threw his glass behind him against the wall, and it smashed. Ulrich did the same. Then, when fresh glasses were brought, Leo in two draughts emptied the bottle.

"You merely sip," he said half apologetically.

But in his case it would seem that it was not thirst alone which drove him to drink. He jumped up restlessly, sat down and jumped up again, to pace the room with energetic strides. He acted like one who gathers himself together courageously to meet an emergency.

Ulrich's eyes followed him, and a smile of comprehension dawned on his face.

"By-the-by, Leo," he began, giving his embarrassed friend a lead. "Did you ever congratulate me on my marriage in your letters? I can't remember whether you did or not."

"No, I didn't," Leo answered gruffly.

"Was that polite?"

"No, but there is no necessity for me to be polite to you?"

"Don't you approve of my marriage?"

"Approve! Good God—don't you see that nothing is to be gained by asking me two years after the marriage has taken place whether I approve of it? My approval or disapproval doesn't matter, but what does matter"— he came nearer and laid both hands on his friend's shoulder, staring into his eyes anxiously and searchingly—"Uli, are you happy?"

Ulrich laughed. It was a laugh of great irony at his own expense that escaped the narrow chest, from which he breathed with such difficulty, and a less sharp ear than Leo's would not have detected in it an undertone of weariness or hesitation.

"Why this sudden seriousness?" he asked. "You know that so long as I sit on the Liberal bench, thresh my own straw, and can prove that man was first created a baron, my happiness is assured."

"You are evading my question," Leo responded; "that being so, I will forthwith devote myself exclusively to this young chicken, but not to the cucumber which accompanies it." So saying he began to eat, apparently with a ravenous appetite.

Ulrich watched him for a few minutes in silence. Then he said, "You are right, after all. It is not worth while to try and pass off as a joke what is of vital gravity. That is an outrage on one's inner self. . . . You ask me if I am happy. Look at me, and say if it is possible for me to be happy? You know that I have always been ænemic and weakly. Only by the most vigilant and rigorous training of my will-power have I been able to develop myself into an even partially useful human being, and by the expenditure of energy in contending with pitiful hindrances, which another, a healthy man, knows nothing about, or, if he does, thinks nothing of. I have had to sacrifice so much sense of personal enjoyment at the same time, that any real happiness where I am concerned is not to be thought of for a moment. Yet I ventured to offer my hand to Felicitas. I, an invalid, a student, and a hermit, with nothing to recommend me except my estate and my honourable intentions, to Felicitas, a creature so soft, and made for pleasure, so irresistibly open to every impression of the imagination and every sensuous charm, who repays the world in such full measure for what she receives from it. Surely it were a crime if I tried to interest her in my quiet abstract speculations. In allowing her every imaginable freedom, I purchase the right to live near her as her husband. She is fond of men's society . . . very well. . . . I acquiesce calmly in all the youth of the neighbourhood flocking to pay her court, and to hear her confess to me in her sweet, shamefaced way what fools men make of themselves for her sake affords me a sort of secret satisfaction. I give her whims *carte-blanche*, whether she builds artistic ruins in the park, or gallops over the meadows by night, or swims in the river in the moonlight, or when the sun is shining shuts the shutters and lies in bed by lamplight till evening, it is all the same to me. She may do exactly as she likes, and the breath of gossip dare not touch her, for she is my wife. I regard her as some beautiful exotic, which has been committed to my care, the strange loveliness of which must be worshipped unconditionally, even if its nature and the laws of its growth are not understood; but how absurd to chatter on about her thus! You know her."

"Yes, I know her," Leo made answer, grimly.

Something in his tone excited Ulrich's suspicion.

"Do you mean to imply that you don't agree with me?"

"I—I imply nothing."

"Please, I would much rather you spoke out."

"Well, then, if I must speak out, I would say that, in spite of all the hard discipline with which you have schooled yourself, you remain as rank and romantic a sentimentalist as ever. For proof that you always were one, take the Isle of Friendship. Ah, by-the-by, does it still exist, our Isle of Friendship?"

"The stream has not swept it away. It stands firm and steadfast, like us two," Ulrich said with a seraphic smile.

"Ah, that is capital! Steadfast as we are. But now, if you please, just recall how you asked of your old godfather, as a present for your confirmation, to be allowed to build a Pagan temple on the island, with we two as Castor and Pollux inside, and think of all the mock sacrifices and solemn ceremonies, and such-like mummery."

"Childish follies, reminiscences of my Homeric readings," Ulrich interposed.

"Yes, but why did these sort of ideas never occur to me? Simply because I am a plain, happy-go-lucky, country squire, whose imagination has never of necessity been stretched to conceive of anything beyond a fiery horse, women, and wine. But you . . . well, the temple speaks volumes. . . . You have a knack of converting those you care for into ideal beings, who exist absolutely only in your fancy."

"Do you mean to say that I overrate Felicitas?"

"When will you have done with your inquisitorial 'Do you mean to say?' Remember that I am not a poacher. But to return to Felicitas. You know that I knew her when she was in pinafores. Quite apart from the fact that she was often at Halewitz, being a distant cousin to me, at one time—once I was devilish fond of her. But I never regarded her in the light of what you call a rare exotic bloom. Either I hadn't a sufficiently discerning eye, or, blockhead that I am, I know women better than you with your sevenfold wisdom."

Ulrich fixed his eyes steadily on the floor.

Leo, after he had looked at him with a shyly inquiring glance, took heart and blurted out, "Man, tell me this. Why on earth were you so mad as to make her your wife?"

Ulrich shrank and cowered under the direct blow. "I fail to understand you, Leo," he said, on the defensive; and Leo saw with some alarm that he had gone too far.

"I mean after . . . what had happened," he explained, scarcely audibly.

"And what had happened? Because her husband fell by your hand in honourable combat, was I to be prevented from winning her? True friends that we are, we are not quite identical. If I had not always felt sure that I had acted according to your principles, I might almost say in your interest!"

Leo laughed loud. "Good heavens! in mine?" he exclaimed, interrupting him.

"Yes, certainly, and I will tell you why. You remember that memorable evening when you came tearing to my place and said to me, 'Rhaden has sought a dispute with me at cards, and I have been obliged to challenge him. You must be my second, of course.' Now, do you also recollect what I asked you at the same time?"

Leo gazed at him blankly. "I remember," he murmured.

"I said, 'This wrangle might easily be only a blind. The country rings with all sorts of scandal. You know that I would not lend myself to perpetrate a wrong, and so I ask you solemnly, as our friendship is sacred, does any tie exist between you and Felicitas, forbidden by laws human and divine?' You answered, 'No,' and I was satisfied, because the idea of either of us lying to each other would be too absurd. Is it not so?"

"Yes, it would have been absurd," repeated Leo, and pressed his lips together.

"There was nothing wonderful in the fact that one of the duellists should fall at the hands of the other, no matter how paltry the cause of quarrel. We all knew Rhaden's vindictive nature. I don't deny that you wished to spare him, but you got heated, and as luck would have it your third bullet took a fatal direction. The thing happened, and we had to take the consequences. It was quite right of you to go away for a time out of reach of the women's cackle, and whether you were equally wise, after your period of detention in a fortress was over, to go so far abroad and let nothing be heard of you for six months, is to my mind doubtful, for it simply opened one door of conjecture after the other to the gossips and slanderers."

He stopped, and damped his projecting lips on the edge of his wine-glass. His cheeks burned, and the thin transparent face seemed illumined by an inward fire. But he continued in the same strain of merciless, matter-of-fact calm.

"You will probably not have forgotten anything that passed at our last meeting? You had just received sentence—two years—a round sum, as you expressed it, half of which, thank God, you were let off. You wanted to give yourself up that same evening. We were sitting over our wine celebrating a separation, as to-day we celebrate our reunion. That is four and a half years ago, and meanwhile many things have changed. You handed over to me the necessary papers, and made me the trustee of your property. Unfortunately, without strictly stipulating that I should have complete authority in your absence. But more of that hereafter. Next you said distinctly, 'I have yet another favour to ask of you. You

know that through me Felicitas is placed in an unpleasant position. Naturally it would not be possible for me to venture in her neighbourhood, even if I were to be soon set at liberty, and as the question "What will become of her?" is much on my mind, I beg you with all my heart to protect her . . . stand by her, and see that no breath of the hateful calumny crosses her threshold.' Is that correct?"

"Correct! Yes, yes," Leo said irritably, and stabbed at the remains of the fowl, which lay in cold congealed gravy.

"And what did I ask you then?"

"Don't know. It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter; only make haste and have done."

"I asked you," Ulrich went on unperturbed, "'Do you bear any old love towards her in your heart?' and you replied, 'I did, but it is all past now.' And I asked you further, 'Then is she free?' and you said, 'As far as I am concerned, she is.'"

"But, man, how could I suspect that you yourself——"

"Does that alter the case? Was she less free on that account?"

"Get out with your judicial hair-splitting. You have spoilt my appetite," said Leo, laying down his fork.

"Forgive me, dear old boy," Ulrich responded; "but I can't spare you this explanation, lest you should end by reproaching me with having thrown dust in your eyes, and having made a breach between us by my marriage."

"It seems to me that is what it will amount to, as it is," Leo growled, looking gloomily before him.

"What! you say that?" Ulrich stammered, as if he could scarcely believe his ears.

"Perhaps you will give me your views as to how our relations are to continue."

"My view is, that if at heart all is the same as of old, the ways and means of continuing our intercourse need concern us least."

"That is excellent, quite excellent, and only what one would expect from a man of ideal sentiment. But it is just as it always was; your knowledge of life deserts you wherever love and friendship and fine feeling come in. A woman, old fellow, stands between us now. And do you imagine for a moment that this woman could bring herself to forget what has happened sufficiently to tolerate calmly my coming and going at Uhlenfelde? And even if she were willing, how could I consent to it? Remember there's a boy running about your house—you are fond of him, eh?"

A melancholy gleam of acquired parental pride fluttered over Ulrich's face.

"I am very fond of him," he said softly.

"When I knew him he was quite a little chap, four years old at

most. He often sat on my knee. He was lovable, that much I know about him. But what is the good of recalling it? The boy has the features of the man whom I once saw, through the smoke of my pistol, fall to the ground with a bullet in his side. Isn't that enough?"

Ulrich breathed heavily and stared at him.

"And now I tell you, once for all," Leo continued, raising his voice, "that if you had asked the advice, which would only have been fitting before taking so grave a step, of your stupid old comrade Leo Sellenthin at the time you resolved to plunge into this marriage, prompted either by mad generosity or an equally mad passion, he would have answered you clear and straight, as is his way, 'Choose between her and me.' There!"

Ulrich grew a shade paler, and his left hand clasped the sofa-corner convulsively. He rose slowly, saying in a voice which anxiety at the thought of his friend breaking with him completely altered—

"Leo, you know that I cling to you as to a part of my own body. But I will know the truth. Are you trying to bring about a rupture? If so, say so."

A peal of laughter came from Leo.

"Ah, now I have caught it, as usual," he cried. "All our life long we have had these scenes. When we were fourth-form boys—well, you know what it used to be. Once when I tore myself from you because I got bored with philosophising in your company about the good of humanity, and preferred to lie under the garden hedge with Rupp and Sydow to bombard the pretty girls as they went by with paper pellets, then I got a note—'You are insincere . . . a traitor . . . I will do away with myself.' . . . Ay, the devil take your confounded heroics."

He stood up and soothed his friend, who sank back again on the sofa-cushions, and caressed comically his bristly hair.

"There, there, little girlie," he laughed. "So long as you live you won't get rid of me, good for nothing that I am. Who would nurse you and stroke your head when the white mice bother you? and who would preach morality to me and cram worn-out wisdom into me when I got into scrapes, if——" He stopped suddenly and cast a side-long glance at the keyhole; then seized an empty bottle and hurled it with a kind of war-whoop at the hinges of the door, so that it smashed to pieces in contact with the iron.

Ulrich sprang up in horror. "What has happened?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Leo explained, perfectly calm again. "Only a worm of a head waiter was sneaking around, probably to listen to us, so I tried to give him his death-blow."

Ulrich looked at him in bewilderment.

"You think I have roughened somewhat out there amongst savages, eh?" Leo asked, with a good-natured laugh. "But never mind, I have come back to you sound and whole. A fellow who has sifted and proved himself, so that at this moment he doubts whether in the whole of God's earthly garden there grows a finer specimen than his lowly self. Sometimes when I have had to go six months without anything to eat, I have been able to subsist on my self-satisfaction, as the bear sucks its paws, and grown fatter. I have a magnificent maxim, which is 'Repent nothing.' And if at one time I was a wild customer, and have my conscience loaded to the utmost capacity, nevertheless I have been able to enjoy myself, and must be content. Only woe to him who reminds me of it. I will pay him out by bringing home to him all the vexation and resentment it has cost me. Then what has a man got faults for, if he mayn't be revenged for them on some one else?"

"A comfortable philosophy," laughed Ulrich.

"I make everything comfortable for myself," Leo replied, stroking his blond beard back over his shoulders; "sins as well as reformation. Now, when I have awakened to full consciousness of my youthful folly, and see that I have squandered the best years of my life, neglected my possessions, sinned against my friends—don't interrupt; I have, more than you think—grieved my mother's heart and made her suffer for my wickedness, if I burst forth in lamentation, or tormented myself with self-reproaches, or sank into a slough of despair, would it do anybody any good? Nobody. What should I undo that has happened in the past? Nothing! On the contrary, I should but complicate matters. And now shall I tell you how I happen to have come home? Your last letter was forwarded from Buenos Ayres to the steppes, where I had been camping for a few months. I had come in from a buffalo-hunt, sweating and tired as a dog, when it was put into my hand. You wrote of my property being in a bad way, of the master's eye being needed in all directions, that you could not stave off ruin much longer—and a good deal more. I knew well enough that it must be on the decline, especially since I played away such monstrous sums in that cursed den of thieves, Monte Carlo; but I had been too easy-going to think about it. Over in Europe was a world full of cares and worries; but here was freedom and sheer living for the joy of living. 'Let the whole fabric crumble,' said I to myself. 'Keep out of the way of the *débris* and stay here. Why shouldn't I?' Mother and sisters were provided for. I owed no one anything, so I left the campfire and wandered forth into the dusky steppe to reflect further on the matter. I felt that I might hit on the right solution there, for I don't believe there could be a spot more adapted for self-communion than that grassy desert, with the wide grey sky overhead.

That is why the people of those parts, too, are so cursedly cute and murder each other without prejudice.

"Well, the long and short of it was that when I was striding along a ploughed path, between wheatears as tall as a man, my foot struck against something. It was the carcass of a horse which had fallen there. One comes across such a sight on the roads every fifty yards, and often it is not one dead horse only, but heaps of them. What struck me about this one was that they hadn't taken off its harness. It was still warm, and could have been dead scarcely twenty-four hours. Apparently it had belonged to the caravan of our expedition, and I resolved to give our guides a reminder for their negligence. Then as I contemplated this poor beast, that looked at me with wide-open, blue-grey eyes as if it were yet alive, there came into my head the saying of a man who endowed our squirearchy with new life, new strength, and new *morale*, words that he once spoke in the Reichstag—'A good horse dies in harness.' And all of a sudden I saw *you* before me—you with your miserable skeleton body, who, with colossal energy, have had to wrestle for every inch of what you have become; you whom every half-fledged stripling could knock down, but whom the lowest drunkards among your tenants worship with as much reverence and awe as their God—you who were born to be anything but a country squire, and yet have so trained yourself to it that you have converted the old tumble-down heritage of your ancestors into a modern model estate—you who sit up at night poring over scientific books, and never weary of drinking in new knowledge—you who have given our constituency a name in the Reichstag (don't protest; I know. Even out there people sometimes read German newspapers). Yes, I saw you before me, labouring on without pause or rest, till the weak remnant of flesh that still hung on your bones was demanded as tribute.

"'A good horse dies in harness,' I repeated over and over again to myself, and began to be just a little bit ashamed. And you see, for me to feel ashamed, when otherwise I was so well satisfied with myself, meant that there was something rotten somewhere. So, 'Egad!' said I to myself. 'Tilt with your thick skull against all obstacles, and be a damned steady fellow; and to begin your reformation at once you shall start for home at dawn of day.' And that same night, as a proof of my strong moral heroism, I drank the whole company (for the most part God-forsaken scum) under the table—at least I would have done so if there had been a table. When they were all lying in artistic attitudes on the grass I had my horse saddled, and with my two servants and the necessary provisions I began my gallop into space. The beasts sniffed in the morning air almost as if they scented the Halewitz stables. In three weeks I was at Buenos Ayres, in five at Hamburg . . . eighteen hours later

at the Prussian Crown, where I am sitting now. Come, drink another!"

The glasses clinked, and Ulrich's eyes, radiant with pride, hung on his new-found friend.

"Do your people know of your arrival?" he asked.

"They haven't any idea of it. Unknown, I shall slink into my house and lands, like my prototype, the noble long-suffering old Ulysses. I am afraid I shall not find the outlook very brilliant."

"I will not prejudice you beforehand," Ulrich said. "We shall have time to talk business when you have seen things with your own eyes. Your steward, Kutowski, will scarcely be able to succeed in hoodwinking you, however much he may try. They are all well, your people. Your mother's hair is whiter, but she is quite as jolly, and quite as pious, as ever, and your sister Elly has grown into a sweetly pretty girl, and already is much admired. Your sister Johanna——" He paused, and the lines of care on his forehead deepened.

"Well, what about her?" asked Leo, in surprise.

"You will see for yourself," was the response. "Her long widowhood does not seem to have been good for her. She is lonely and embittered. She has given up coming to Uhlenfelde, and is on bad terms with my wife. Why, no one knows. She also seems to bear a grudge against me."

"Nonsense! I can't believe that!" exclaimed Leo. "She always swore by you, and does still, I am sure."

"Apropos," Ulrich interposed, "do you know there is a new member in your household?"

"Indeed! Who may that be?"

"Hertha Prachwitz—Johanna's stepdaughter."

Leo recollected. He had never seen her, but his mother had raved about her in nearly every letter.

"I suppose you know," Ulrich said, smiling, "that she is heiress to the Podlinsky estates. It is said that your mother jealously guards this treasure, with the express purpose of offering her to you immediately on your return."

Leo laughed.

"That is just like her, dear old lady. Since I was in jackets she has coupled me with every female possessor of a respectable fortune. I shall have no objection to seeing the little heiress. But, what is more important than that or anything else, Uli——"

"Well?"

"What are you and I to do?"

"Yes, what are you and I to do?"

The friends looked at each other in blank silence.

III

THE river flowed on its way in the last rays of the setting sun. Its smooth surface was still steeped in purple, and a wide-meshed network of silver ribbons, at one place melting into each other, at another clearly defined and intermingled with fantastic shapes, reeds, flowers, and sedges, spread itself over the darkly glowing water. But the willows, which kept watch like sentinels on the bank in vague shadowy rows, were already casting broad bands of darkness across the edge of the shining mirror, and these were slowly encroaching on its centre.

The distance lay veiled in a blue haze. Here and there a damp mist mounted from the meadows and clung in silvery wisps about the tops of solitary clumps of poplars which rose above the level, wide-spreading fields, and stood outlined sharply against the rosy glow of the evening sky. Silence reigned far and wide. From time to time a dog in some invisible farmyard bayed sleepily. A broody reed-sparrow now and then gave an anxious twitter, as if in fear of an enemy, and high aloft the subdued cry of a kingfisher, returning late from the chase to its nest, sounded through the air.

There was life on the water. A raft on its way into the valley revolved lazily in the circle of light, which grew gradually smaller, and being now cut in two, threatened to vanish soon altogether in darkness. Like a great snake with fiery jaws it drifted there. The flames beneath the supper-cauldron blazed, and blue-grey vapour ascended to paint a long strip of cloud on the evening sky, where here and there a star shyly opened its eye.

A vehicle came rattling along the high-road which led from Münsterberg to the ferry in the village of Wengern, and drew up at the ferry station, which was deserted and dark, ferry-boat and man having retired to rest on the other side. The powerful outline of Leo's athletic figure filled the back seat. He was leaning back indolently, whistling snatches of a nameless song and sending forth clouds of smoke from a short clay pipe. Pulling himself erect, he cried out in a voice of thunder to the opposite bank, "Ferryman, a-hoy!"

Some time elapsed before he was answered by a sign of life.

The light of a lantern moving hither and thither at last settled its course, and from the end of the raft cast a long gold line across the stream.

The driver, who was a young strapping peasant lad, belonging to the stables of the Prussian Crown, turned round on the box, and begging the "gnädiger Herr's" pardon, suggested that it was not the proper big ferry-boat but only a skiff which was coming across.

Leo gave vent to his ire in a salvo of Spanish oaths, and the driver thought the best thing to do would be to send the ferryman back.

"So that I may kick my heels here for another half-hour," Leo said. "No, my lad, I would rather use my own strong legs, and enter my ancestral home on foot. Have *you* a home, my lad?"

"Why, of course, sir," the driver replied. "My father sent me out to service that I might learn something of the ways of the world."

Leo chuckled, and went on smoking in silence. Every word of the broad, homely dialect that fell on his ear, every fair sunburnt honest countenance that met his eye, renewed his affection for his half-forgotten birthplace.

"And I, fool, didn't want to come back," he murmured to himself.

The boat landed.

The ferryman was still old Jürgens, with the plaid woollen comforter round his neck and the same great patches of sailcloth on the knees of his trousers. He began to grumble and scold.

"Why hadn't they shouted across 'Horse and carriage.' Did not every baby in arms know by this time that was the right way of summoning the big ferry barge instead of the small boat."

"You are quite right, Jürgens," said Leo, tapping him majestically on the shoulder; "it is a grave scandal that your system of governing the stream is not more respected."

At the first sound of his voice the old man shook with fright. Then he snatched off his cap and stammered in confusion, "The master! the master!"

The post of ferryman at Wengern was in the gift of Halewitz, and it had been given twenty years ago to old Jürgens (for even then he had been old), in reward for his long and faithful services to the family. It was no sinecure; but where does such a thing as a sinecure exist in the country of Prussia?

The aged retainer struggled to keep back his tears; he seized the leonine paw that rested on his shoulder, and seemed as if he would never stop stroking it with his horny gnarled hands.

Leo, who was every moment feeling more at home in his patriarchal inheritance, ordered his luggage to be left in the little ferry-house, and, lavishly overpaying the young driver, dismissed him.

The boat put off and glided with a slight grinding on the pebbles of the shallow water into mid-stream. Leo, content, absently let his hand dip into the water, and delighted in the little sparkling rivulets that ran up his arm. Meanwhile the old man gazed at him from the end of the boat with big tear-dimmed eyes.

"It would be best," he said at last, 'to row the "gnädiger Herr' as far as the Isle of Friendship, which is halfway there."

Leo nodded. The Isle of Friendship! So well known was the tie which bound him and Ulrich together that their friendship had become a romance current amongst the people, so that even the name they had given in joke to the place where as boys they had loved best to meet, which they had never mentioned except to a few near relations, had grown into a geographical landmark for the public. Ah, but if they knew! If they could see the ghost which had arisen between them!

"Repent nothing," a voice cried out within him; and he struck the water with his clenched fist, till a fountain of glistening drops started up around him.

Old Jürgens nearly dropped his oars, in alarm, and stuttered out a query.

Leo laughed at him. "I didn't mean anything, old man," he said. "I was simply quarrelling with brother within."

"No good to be got out of him—maybe he's a devil," said the old ferryman, philosophically, and rowed on.

The boat had turned its keel down the river, which shimmered faintly as it wound along between the dusky blackness of the willow-bushes, now widening almost into a lake, then narrowing where a headland, like an outstretched knee, jutted darkly into the ripples.

The deep ruddy glow on the horizon now covered a smaller space. A phosphorescent green, slashed with small silver-fringed clouds, slowly struggled higher and higher till it was lost in the dark blue of night. The twilight of midnight, the dreamy magic of which is only known to men who have their homes in northern climes, was descending on the earth.

Just in front of the boat floated the raft, a huge mass reflected in the shining water, with the smoke from smouldering brushwood curling softly upwards and hovering in the air above it. In a few minutes they overtook it. Figures crouching on the rafters raised their heads in languid curiosity and stared at the boat as it passed. Red flames flickered still under the cauldron, and from within the straw-roofed cabin, rough as any rubbish-heap in the fields, came the sound of a woman's voice singing a plaintive ditty.

In about half an hour the black shadowy outline of an island reared itself from the middle of the gleaming mirror of water. It resembled a massive flower-basket, for from the stony edge of its

banks the ragged branches of the alders drooped far over into the stream.

This was it. At the sight of it a host of pictures and memories surged up from his heart's secret depths, where they had till now lain dormant, sent to sleep over and over again by the one grim, overshadowing thought that had brooded on his mind like a vulture, the deadening flap of whose wings had drowned for years all home voices and sentiment within him.

Leo started up, and sought with eager eyes to penetrate the thick boscage. But he could not descry a gleam of the white temple. It lay buried in the dusk of the trees. But there on the right bank were to be seen buildings black and ragged in outline; that was Uhlenfelde, the ancient, noble house where lanky Uli ruled as lord and master.

And beside him, as mistress—— "Be calm, don't think about it," he cried inwardly.

The boat took a sharp curve towards the left bank, where, amidst tall reeds, shone forth the white sand of a landing-place.

A few minutes later Leo was striding alone over the dewy meadows, from which there rose a sweet scent so thick and heavy one could almost grasp it with the hand. At his feet, to right and left, a thousand grasshoppers kept up a lively chorus. The little creatures, startled by his footsteps, hopped on like heralds before him, and in the branches of the elms which studded the meadow path he fancied that he heard from time to time a rustling whisper of welcome. A wilderness of blossom rioted in the uncut hedges. The honeysuckle bells swept his hands, and a thick rank growth of bindweed and runnet twined about his feet. A fine moisture sprinkled his brow refreshingly. He stood still and looked round him. All was his property as far as his eye could reach in the summer twilight. He was overcome by a sense of shame. This soft, warm nest, designed by a kind Providence, as it seemed, for his especial comfort, had he not, more thoughtlessly, it is true, than heartlessly, been ready to sacrifice it to the first stranger who came along?

A lofty consciousness of inherited possessions, the beauty of the summer night, and the nearness of home, combined to inspire and soften him. He pulled off his cap, folded his hands over the warm bowl of his pipe and prayed, with tears pouring down his cheeks. It was a man, ripe and strong, moderately gifted, but full of common sense, knowing well what he had learnt from life, what he might do and might not, who came thus boldly into the presence of his Maker and spoke frankly to Him.

When he had done, he puffed vigorously at his cooling pipe, and in a serene mood walked towards the ancestral seat of the Sellenthins, which greeted him out of the shadows.

IV

HE came to a standstill at the gate-house. As he was about to pull the bell, a din of singing voices fell on his ear, interrupted by guttural laughter and applause, which elicited a new and more confused outburst of song. The noise seemed to proceed from the bailiff's house, which was the dwelling of Uncle Kutowski as well as of the two bailiffs. Presumably the stream of light, which till now had been concealed from his eyes by the gate-post, came from the same quarter.

"They manage to have a rollicking good time of it without me at Halewitz, evidently," he said to himself, frowning, and was going to climb over the wall near the wicket gate, when he remembered in time the broken bottle-glass stuck in the cement of the bastions for the reception of thieves and tramps.

There was nothing to be done but to slink round in the shadow of the park wall to the little secret garden door which once had been contrived for him by Uncle Kutowski, so that his excursions by night should not come to his father's ears. Of course it was an understood thing that in so zealously rendering this service, Uncle Kutowski also acted in his own interest, for he too had had good reasons for keeping his nocturnal adventures private and unbeknown to the master of the house.

Leo paced slowly along the dry moat which skirted the park, and over which the hundred-year-old limes of Halewitz cast the shade of their dark masses of foliage, till he came to the spot which hesupposed was only known to himself and to his uncle. But, to his vexation and amazement, he saw that the little door was standing wide open, and, worse still, the wilderness of brambles and gooseberry bushes which, on the inner side, had almost buried the approach to the exit, had been uprooted and levelled and replaced by a convenient gravel path that seemed to invite alluringly any evil-disposed person to the privy door.

"Thus do our old vices punish us," thought Leo; and he recalled with a stab at his heart the period of his life when at this door, night after night, there stood ready for him a saddled horse, which Uncle Kutowski had procured for him, and which towards morning would be driven out to grass, sweating and covered with foam.

"Wait a bit, you scoundrels," he muttered betwixt his teeth; "I'll show you which is the right path."

There were still lights illuminating the windows of the castle that faced the flower-parterre. A broad stone terrace ran nearly the whole length of the rambling building, and old vines which never bore fruit draped the balustrade. In the middle of the terrace a flight of dilapidated steps, flanked by two pock-marked nymphs in sandstone, led down to the garden. The glass doors of the garden salon were open, and the hanging lamp with its three sconces lighted the table, from which supper had been cleared away, and sent a warm red glow across the terrace as far as the venerable heads of the nymphs, whose fragile profiles it touched with gold.

Leo walked as softly as the crunching gravel and his own vigorous footsteps would allow, towards the light. He avoided the wooden kiosque, the white plaster pillars of which, seen from the opposite side, gave a finish to the perspective of the landscape, and rounding the fish-pond, from whose slimy depths rose a soft gurgling, he banged his head against the obelisk. It was a stupid erection of brickwork and mortar, with a bronze tablet let into the middle, recording for posterity the heroic deeds of Standard-bearer Fritz von Sellenthin at the battle of Hohenfriedberg.

"A pity the storms have not demolished this bric-a-brac," thought Leo, as he rubbed the lump on his forehead with a pained smile.

At this moment there appeared framed in the brightly illuminated doorway two girlish figures with their arms round each other. They moved forward with a lazy rocking motion, and the gold rays of the lamp flashed on their heads and outlined the shadows cast by the two slender young forms with a narrow line of light.

They had flung on *negligée* attire with the ingenuous freedom of a pair of young virgins who feel secure in there being no man in the house, and presented themselves in dressing-jackets and with flowing tresses. One was nearly a head taller than the other, and a reddish gleam shot from the loosened plaits which floated over her head and shoulders. By daylight she would probably be a brunette. The shorter girl displayed unmistakably the famous Sellenthin gold in her blond locks.

For a moment it seemed as if they were going to descend into the garden, and Leo quickly took refuge in the shadow of the terrace wall, where he would be hidden from view by the vine espalier. But they stayed up above after all, seating themselves on the balustrade, and swinging their feet so that when they touched the ground a shower of dust, sand, and little stones fell on his head. The two girls gazed down into the garden, and looking up he could see the dainty shining oval of their faces bent towards him. He felt a little nervous at his post of observation. It was innocent

schoolgirl chatter that he overheard, intermingled with kisses and giggles.

In one of the voices, which sounded low and muffled, there was a caressing note like the cooing of a dove. The other was a rich, full alto, which seemed to well forth from the depths of the speaker's chest; this fulness of tone was accentuated by the hard *r*, slightly reminiscent of the stable. With some difficulty he recalled his little sister in the first voice, and concluded that the other belonged to Johanna's step-daughter, the rich little heiress whom his mother had kept bewitched in the ancient castle for his especial benefit.

They talked of clothes, girl friends, and books; of getting up early, of milking and poultry-feeding; and finally they began to talk about himself. The letter from Buenos Ayres, which must have arrived that morning, was evidently in their minds. Johanna's step-daughter revealed to her little companion energetic plans, which convinced him that mamma had already begun her angling for the goldfish.

"Do you know what I shall do, Mouse?" said she. "I shall write to my guardian, the old judge, and ask him for the money necessary to fit out an expedition. Then I shall go with it to South America, and look for him, and paint Halewitz in such glowing colours that he'll get homesick and come back to Europe. And directly we reach Halewitz, I shall say, 'Now my mission is ended. Good-bye.'"

"In your place," suggested Elly, "I should marry him."

"I shall never marry," replied Hertha. "I am an orphan, and shall go into a convent."

Leo closed his eyes with an amused smile. This charming nonsense was music to him. Meanwhile, the drunken merriment in the bailiff's house grew louder. At the sound of it, Hertha spoke her mind with a will.

"It is a shame that an end cannot be put to such mismanagement. The master roams about the world, and his estates are going to ruin."

"Do you think it really is so bad as that?" asked Elly, anxiously.

"It is so bad that it couldn't be worse. Look at Ulrich Kletzingk's face when he rides over here. But he can do nothing. It was not he who was given full authority, but beautiful Uncle Kutowski. If I could, I would hound that fellow out of the place with a horse-whip."

"Spoken like a thorough good chap," thought Leo. "I'll have her for my wife, and then they'll find there'll be the devil to pay." Yet, at the same moment, anxiety on account of his neglected property weighed heavily upon his soul. The chorus of a drinking-

song struck up opposite, the refrain ending in a cadence of hiccoughs. Leo's fists itched, but he controlled himself, for he did not wish to spoil the humour of the situation.

"I am afraid that *he* is there too," Elly whispered hesitatingly.

Leo was all attention.

"Of course he is there," Hertha laughed, with a ring of scorn in her voice; "he is certain to be wherever there is anything low going on."

"Don't always wound my feelings," Elly complained. "You know how gone I am on him."

"Hum! so the little one has begun already," thought Leo, and resolved to speak to her seriously, for falling in love was a Sellenthin family weakness.

"You may be gone on him as much as you like," replied Hertha, "but he should be open and above board, and not sneak over here behind people's backs when he comes to see Uncle Kutowski. That is scarcely fitting behaviour on the part of one we honour with our admiration."

"But what else is he to do?" asked Elly, in a troubled voice. "If mamma saw him she would tell Ulrich that he was hanging about. And the last time he only came through the park to serenade me. And that song, 'The Smiling Stars,' he composed especially for me. He told me so. And what he said about the serenade was, 'I was a little elated by wine, gracious Fräulein, otherwise I should certainly not have had the courage.' He always speaks so modestly and politely. He is quite out of the common."

"Just wait, you out-of-the-common young man," Leo said to himself; "you shan't escape."

At this point a dear familiar voice sent forth an affectionate warning to the children—"Come in, or you'll catch cold." It was the voice in which, as long as he could remember, his vagabond spirit had ever found rest and steadfastness.

He bounded up and clasped the espalier with both hands. A sudden impulse seized him to rush out of his hiding-place and hug the dear old mother to his breast. But again he controlled himself. Before he returned to his own he must first surprise the curious company at the bailiff's house, and take them red-handed in their crimes.

The shimmering light which had made the chipped heads of the nymphs glow vanished. The terrace steps were lost in darkness, and the wooden outer door creaked on its hinges. Then all was still. The coast was clear for Leo.

He opened the wicket-gate which connected the park with the courtyard, and went by a familiar path in the direction from which the noises, becoming more and more tipsy and indistinct, echoed

over the sleeping square of yard. Not a single dog barked, all apparently being too well accustomed to the manners of this particular household.

The windows of the bailiff's room were open. In the lamplight clouds of tobacco-smoke could be seen issuing through the chinks of the venetian blinds. Leo leaned against the window-ledge so that he could look in on the topers at his ease.

The company lounged comfortably at the long green table, which was usually loaded with official papers concerning police-regulations, rents, and rates. Master Kutowski presided. With his bristly head cropped nearly bald, his long waving beard abundantly powdered with snuff, and shading from silvery white to yellowish-green, with his light glassy, moist little eyes, his red-lumpy and wart-covered nose, he presented a perfect picture of the convivial, sturdy, boon companion, yet one who, if brought to book, might pose easily as a sober worthy rather than a consummate rascal. He had pushed his Hungarian fez at a rakish angle over his left ear, and held a silver-set meerschaum between his black teeth. Leo recognized it. It bore the inscription, "In thanks for faithful friendship, from Leo Sellenthin, *stud-agri*."

On either side of him two guests had taken their places who were not resident on the Halewitz estates; on the left, an old animal-painter who for years had hung about the neighbourhood in summer, sponging on the hospitality of the bailiffs. He was nick-named "Cow-Augustus." On the right was a youth whom Leo seemed to know, but could not put a name to. His good-looking, smooth, but somewhat sallow face, cut about with diagonal scars like a rink with the marks of skaters, stood out with a cool, rather assumed air of distinction from the row of flushed, sunburnt, rustic countenances, from which type even the painter's, with its full stubbly beard, scarcely differed. The youth was apparently at the moment the only person sober at the table, and undoubtedly he was the only one who had cultivated the art of beer-drinking seriously and artistically, as if it had been his calling in life.

Next came, right and left, the two bailiffs of Halewitz, a couple of stewards from the neighbouring estates of Wengern and Kantzendorf, and four raw, rosy-cheeked lads, to all appearances pupils of the land-agent; lastly, at the bottom of the table was the lanky brewer, who superintended the pouring out of the drink. Thus the whole of the official staff to whom Leo's property had been entrusted for the last four years were assembled here in a jovial carousal. He propped his chin in his hands, feeling the grim humour of the situation, and awaited events, as the cat watches at a mouse-hole.

The young gentleman with the gashed face, who was addressed as "Herr Kandidat," and seemed to enjoy in a high degree the respect

of the party, was loudly called upon to give them a solo. He affected to refuse at first.

"Have compassion on your own ears, gentlemen," he said mincingly, in the exaggerated lisping accent cultivated by our student contingent. He pronounced *a* like *ae*, *ei* like *ai*, and his *r*'s like gurgling *g*'s. Then he began to sing—

"Oh, smile down, ye smiling stars,
And let it be night around me . . . "

Could he have guessed that some one stood listening at the window who hailed the first line of his song with a whistle of recognition, he would have chosen another. Nevertheless, he did not sing badly. In the deep notes his voice sounded soft and flexible, in the high it had the brilliant falsetto note which girls are apt to rave about. His delivery, with its sentimental diminuendoes and coquettish staccatoes, was reminiscent of the music-hall style, on which it was doubtless modelled. At any rate, it found an appreciative public now. A storm of enthusiastic applause broke forth when he had finished.

"Long live the singer. Vivat hurrah!" bawled Uncle Kutowski.

But the hero thus honoured thought fit to cavil. "One generally says 'health to the singer' in such cases," he said, stiffening into frigid dignity.

The old man suggested that it didn't matter as long as one was sociable and friendly—that was the chief thing; and the painter, who for some while had been gazing into his glass in a profound reverie, suddenly uttered a deep groan, which resounded terrifically down the table.

This ejaculation of misery caused a fresh outburst of merriment. The revellers began to exceed all bounds; only the student with the slashed face smiled with meditative deliberation. He drank a special toast to the health of the despairing painter, and made him a bow fit for a prince.

"Silence, gentlemen," commanded Uncle, knocking on the side of his plate with his pipe. "Now I am going to make you a speech."

All at once forgetting his dignity, the Candidate yelled forth, "Long live all jolly good fellows."

"In the midst of our rejoicing," continued Uncle Kutowski, "we will not omit to think with gratitude of our noble host, to whom we are indebted for this and other enjoyable evenings."

"Hear, hear!" chortled the Candidate. He hiccoughed, and then became stonily immovable again.

"My dear nephew Leo, who well knows what a treasure he possesses in his grateful old uncle, honest old Uncle Kutowski, who would rather drink nothing but water, and never go out with a

girl, than not do his duty to the death. . . . Now then, you may howl if you like, you colour-dauber."

Instead of the painter, the Candidate set up a howl, in which the whole company joined.

"This Leo," the old man went on, "knowing that in comparison with his old uncle's genius for management, his would be nowhere, shook the dust of the place from his feet, and has now been wandering about the world for years, in order, it would appear, not to disturb our pleasant little gatherings with the annoyance of his presence. The capital young man cannot be praised sufficiently for so much tender consideration. Let us, therefore, drink to my aristocratic nephew, Leo von Sellenthin . . . Long may he live and ——"

"Good evening, my friends," Leo said, opening the door, and thinking that he could not possibly have had a better cue than this for his entry on to the stage.

There was a terrible silence. The brewer, who was a tall old Bavarian, crossed himself; the bailiffs ducked their heads, as if they expected blows. The Candidate stood with his hand glued to his budding moustache; and Uncle Kutowski—the honest old uncle—stared at his nephew with a face as white as chalk, a blue tip to his nose, and the tankard of beer still held in his upraised hand in an attitude of involuntary welcome.

It happened that a diversion was made at this moment by the beer-barrel, to which the brewer had been clinging as to a rock of refuge, tumbling off its stand and rolling with a violent crashing noise under Leo's feet.

He kicked it aside, and let his glance pass contemptuously from one face to the other.

The student with the scarred countenance was the first to collect himself. He rose deliberately, and with a persuasive eloquence, which doubtless he had had opportunities of practising as university orator, he began—

"Really, you have come home just at the propitious moment, Herr von Sellenthin—just when your friends and confidential servants are festively met together to do honour to their absent squire, to-day being the anniversary of—of——" He hummed and hawed, trying to improvise speedily something that would give the day an important significance, which he probably would have accomplished had not Leo saved him the trouble.

"With whom have I the pleasure of speaking?" he asked, towering to his full height over the wretched youth.

"Kurt Brenckenberg—Guestphaliæ Normanneæque," he answered, beginning to swell visibly.

Leo grinned. "Do you belong to the house?"

"What, I? I am here as Herr von Kutowski's guest," answered the youth, loftily.

"That scarcely gives you the right to bid me welcome on my own domain. Kindly do me the favour to put a bridle on your joy at seeing me, till you are asked."

The sharp, forward boy collapsed, and swore fearfully to himself.

"Well, hang it all!" Leo exclaimed, flashing a glance down the table, "does no one offer me a chair, a greeting, or a glass of beer now I am on my own property again?"

Every one jumped up, and the tankard fell clattering from Uncle Kutowski's rigid hand on to the board, which it flooded from one end to the other with brown streams.

Leo acted as if this mishap made him aware of the old man's presence for the first time.

"What, uncle! You here too?" he cried. "I was under the impression that I had strayed into a party of juveniles, who were enjoying a little harmless lark behind your back, and I was about to have a drink with them. But now, of course, the matter takes a different complexion. . . . Do things go on like this every night, dear uncle?"

He was answered by gloomy silence. One of the stewards of the outlying estates had in the meanwhile made an attempt to get out at the door unobserved, but Leo caught him by the sleeve in the nick of time.

"So, old friend," said he, "you want to be off without shaking hands? Certainly at eleven o'clock at night, or rather"—looking at the timepiece—"at eleven-forty, there is precious little to do at Halewitz. It would have been better, perhaps, not to have let yourself been seen here at all. So off with you, and make haste."

At this bidding, not one but two men disappeared through the door.

Leo looked after them, laughing, and then turned to the two bailiffs, who, ashamed and anxious, stared into vacancy with watery eyes.

"We all know the pretty proverb, gentlemen, 'Run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.' You have all been hunting. Good sport. I can agree with you; but who the hounds are is what I am now elucidating."

He looked keenly at the old man, who seemed to have composed himself somewhat, and sat frowning moodily. The reprimanded couple fetched their caps and departed without a word.

Now it was the turn of the four half-fledged striplings. He measured the slight, narrow-chested, overgrown figures, that stood drawn up before him like a row of scarecrows, with a wondering, amused glance.

"Will you kindly introduce me to these gentlemen, dear uncle?"

"Introduce you, eh? Why the dickens shouldn't I introduce you to them?"

"Well, then, I am waiting."

But it pleased the old man to keep silent. He puffed out clouds of smoke and sulked. Leo let him be. Some time elapsed before he elicited any clear information with regard to the name and character of the lads.

"Since when has Halewitz taken pupils?"

"Since I have been agent here, my son."

Leo's eyes flashed; but he checked himself.

"I advise you to write to your respective fathers, young men, and tell them that for the future Halewitz can get on very well without you. Now then, off to bed."

They made their bow and sidled out. The green table had emptied fast, and only the uncle and his two guests still sat on at the upper end. The brewer pretended to busy himself with his cask in the window-seat. Leo signed to him, laughing.

"Am I going to get a glass of beer to welcome me at last, Sigilhöfer?"

"If you like, sir," the Bavarian stammered forth in awed delight, and held a tankard under the tap with a trembling hand.

Leo drank, and wiped his moustache. "Not bad, Sigilhof," he said in praise, offering his hand. "That's the first real greeting I have had since I set foot in my home."

The brewer went to the door, beaming with happiness and satisfaction at having got off so easily.

Uncle Kutowski and the Candidate drew closer together, convulsed by every gradation of fury, while the painter stared vacantly on the ground, lost in lugubrious thought.

Suddenly the Candidate started up, took three steps towards Leo, bowed and smiled affectedly, and drawled through his nose—

"I beg pardon, but I must ask you to give me satisfaction."

Leo put his hands in his pockets, and from his six feet of height eyed from head to foot the anæmic youth, who was endeavouring in vain to assume an air of dignified disdain. Then he laughed and said—

"So you are the son of dear old papa Brenckenberg?"

"My father is Pastor Brenckenberg of Wengern," snarled the pugnacious young man. "But that has nothing to do with it."

"And how is the dear old papa?"

"I have asked you to give me satisfaction, sir."

"Remember me to your father. Congratulate him from me on having reared so promising and sober a sprig for a son."

"What do you mean? Remember, sir, that I am a corps student."

"Then I am afraid, young man, that you'll have to put your nose to the grindstone," answered Leo, "before you become anything better."

The Candidate gave a swaggering bow. "There is nothing to detain me here longer," he said.

"Have you only now discovered that?" Leo asked, turning his back on him. "But wait a moment! One thing more you may tell your good old papa, and that is, I should advise him to put a stop to his gentlemanly son loafing about in Halewitz Park when other people are in bed, with the object of singing pretty songs there, otherwise it is quite possible that the said young gentleman may be brought home to him the next morning suffering from dog-bites."

Young Brenckenberg gave him a look of supreme contempt, and, fuming like a turkey-cock, strutted to the door.

"One after the other," thought Leo, and turned to the painter.

When it dawned on him that it was now his turn to be dealt with, he jumped up and fell on the bosom of the returned squire, weeping hysterically.

"Kick me out!" he cried, in a voice of lamentation. "Kick me out like the rest . . . I deserve it. . . . I am a loafer . . . a sluggard. . . . I waste God's daylight. . . . My cows all have too long legs. . . . So the critics say . . . but I swear it isn't true. . . . I take my oath to you, an honourable man, that cows have long legs."

"Of course, dear old fellow; calm yourself."

"Now I have given up painting them with legs at all . . . I make them legless, like seals. . . . Serves those blackguard critics right. . . . But you are my salvation. . . . Say you will be on my side—promise."

Leo promised everything as he pushed the drunkard firmly back in his chair.

"You will see to the man, uncle."

He growled out an insolent answer.

Leo felt the blood mount hotly to his temples. But a voice within him said, "Keep quiet. Don't embitter this hour of homecoming." So he forced himself to calmness as he said—

"I beg that you will remember your position, my dear uncle."

The old man spat copiously around. Then with a defiant grin, that was a sort of challenge, he said—

"It seems to me that I know my position better than you do, my boy. At any rate, I must ask you not to take me to task again, before other people, else I shall be bound to jog your memory a little."

A shudder ran through Leo's frame. Again the ghost of his old sin rose before him.

"Sleep off your debauch," he murmured, and strode hastily to the door.

It was quiet and dark in the courtyard. The cool night breezes fanned Leo's burning brow, but he was not conscious of it. Foaming at the mouth, with clenched fists he passed the stables, whence now and again the snort of a dreaming animal or the rattle of a chain fell on his ear. The wrath which hitherto it had needed the exercise of all his self-command to suppress, now that he was alone, broke forth the more violently. He had leisure to rave himself out. No one disturbed him, and it was only the iron head of a pole-axe which he nearly ran into in the darkness which brought him to his senses.

Suddenly he laughed out loud. The old Yankee game, "For Life or Death," at which he had so often played so audaciously and won on the other side of the world, should serve him in tame old Europe too, to stop the mouth of his refractory conscience. So, folding his arms as content as a schoolboy who has bethought him of some new trick to play off on a comrade, he walked up the incline to the castle, which stood out, a solid black mass of masonry, against the dark blue of the midnight sky.

Behind him the farm buildings and offices formed a huge semi-circle, grouped round the reed-grown pond, whose surface reflected the faint uncertain dawn of midnight. A solitary light still shone from one of the castle's upstair windows.

He was seized with jubilant longing. "Hurrah! Now for mother!" he exclaimed, throwing his cap up in the air. It flew over the hedge and fell into the garden. "Shall I present myself at the door of my home without a cap, in true vagabond fashion?" he asked himself, with a laugh.

But he was given no time to reflect on the matter, for his shout had awakened one of the yard-dogs, whose bark was echoed in a distant chorus from one or two other directions. The animals seemed to be fast-chained—no doubt an innovation on the part of Uncle Kutowski, to ensure the calves of his nocturnal boon-companions going uninjured.

Then he thought of his friend Leo. Once in a Cæsar-like mood he had taken into his head to have his favourite hound christened by his own name, "So that the fellows should know," he had explained, "that they were to esteem the fine beast as his representative."

"Leo!" he cried, with all the strength of his lungs.

For a moment there was a dead silence.

"Leo!" he called a second time.

And then an ear-splitting, marrow-freezing din arose. The animals seemed suddenly to have gone mad. With their howls was mingled

the clang of shaken chains, and the gnashing of their teeth as they bit on the iron links. Joyous delight, faithful yearning, all the emotions which can sway the breast of a living creature, found moving expression in the wild ecstasy of these chain-laden animals.

Leo felt his eyes grow moist. "It is time I came, indeed," thought he. He made the knocker of the outer portal resound threateningly through the house. The echo came back on his ear in reverberating waves. Then the window of the room where the light was was pushed open, and a white figure leaned out.

"Who is there?" called a woman's voice, which he knew at once.

"Johanna, is it you?"

There was a cry, but it seemed to Leo that it was not by any means a cry of pleasure. His sister's figure disappeared. Two long anxious moments he waited at the door.

The dogs went on howling; people began to stir in the stables and call each other; lanterns flashed hither and thither. At last hurrying footsteps were heard within, crossing the hall, amidst sounds half of laughing, half of weeping. The key turned, the bolts ground back.

And there she was, dear, fat, bright old lady; her nightcap awry on her curly grey hair, her white dressing-gown buttoned up wrong, odd slippers on her feet. There she stood, holding the candle high in her trembling hand, while glistening tear after tear rolled down her cheeks.

"Leo, my dear boy—my dear, dear boy!"

The caressing, confused murmur was half shy, as if she hardly dared all at once to take the son, as son, to her bosom. Then she gave herself a little shake and clung round his neck, while the candle she still held trickled grease down his back. The silence of this embrace was broken by the heartrending howling and whining of the dogs, who yearned for their master with all their lungs. His mother noticed the noise.

"Do they know already?" she asked, as she straightened herself, and, reaching up, took his head between her hands.

He nodded, and kissed the fingers that glided over his cheeks with an anxious touch.

Then a new wave of joy overpowered her. She put the candle on the stairs, and, cowering beside it, she covered her face with her hands and wept bitterly. He was seized with a sense of shame; all this love and longing had been waiting for him, and he, with a brutal thirst for seeing life, had simply turned his back on it and gone his way. He bent over her and half consciously and half absently stroked the crochet edging of her nightcap, from which the grey hair escaped in scanty little curls.

Another light cast its radiance from the back of the hall, and

an infirm old figure came forward trembling and hesitating. His mother dropped her hands, and, laughing through her tears, called out—

"Come, Christian, come. Don't be frightened, you stupid fellow. It really is he. Look at him, and see for yourself that it is."

The old butler, arrayed in Leo's old dressing-gown and Leo's old slippers, in his joy and astonishment let candle and matches fall with a crash on the floor. Tender and servile, half slave and half father, he bent over the master's hand, wiping away nervously his fast-falling tears.

A fresh feeling of shame took possession of Leo. "What a wonderful thing was the faithful soul of such old servants!" he thought. "No matter how you might have bullied and abused them all your life, they still clung to you and worshipped you as a god." And then aloud he said, "That's enough now, Christian; we shall have other opportunities of rejoicing together. Go and let the dogs loose, or the brutes will go mad."

The old man wrapped his dressing-gown over his poor aged ribs, which had been exposed in the excitement of the moment, and withdrew on tottering legs without saying a word.

Meanwhile the mother had begun to be ashamed of her outer woman, and after she had kindled a light in the garden-salon, she hurried away to put on a dress, still undecided between laughing and crying.

Leo was alone. The hanging lamp, which he had seen earlier casting a glory about the heads of the two young girls, seemed to greet him with its light. Half his life, his dreams, his happiness, and his sins—all were associated with this flame, which had shone upon his youth like some dear silent confidential friend.

He walked round the table with striding steps. In the middle of it was the old majolica vase with open dragons' jaws, where a bunch of *gloire de Dijon* roses languished exhausted from the heat of the day. Knitting and an album lay beside it, and on top the lady cook's account-book, which she was in the habit of leaving here open when she went to bed. So it had been thirty years ago; so it was to-day.

His eye wandered to the walls. There hung the same old pictures: Nelson at the battle of Trafalgar—brave Nelson with his compass and telescope in the midst of clouds of gunpowder and fiery zigzags. When he was six years old he had played at being Nelson, and constructed a deck and bridge of chairs, while Ulrich and Johanna cried "Hurrah!" and had to fire guns by striking matches.

This brought Johanna to his mind. What was she doing? Why didn't she come and throw herself into his arms?

"Ah, she is making herself smart," he thought, and chuckled.

The famous clock which his grandfather had brought from Paris, anno 14, still stood on the bureau with its bulky drawers and gilded feet. The clock represented a four-horsed victoria. The wheel of the gold triumphal chariot formed the dial, and every time it struck the hour the flaming sun which formed its axle revolved with a hum like a spinning-wheel.

Over the bureau was the portrait, framed in its own horns, of the stag with sixteen antlers which King Frederick William IV., in the year 1726, had shot (in his official capacity of Royal Ranger). The miller's daughter and the chimney-sweep, two coquettish old Dresden figures standing on either side on the rickety consols, still cast amorous glances at each other, unmindful of the fact that they became every year older, and so more valuable. All the dear old ornaments stood in their familiar places. The chalk bust of Frederick William IV. on the cigar cabinet, whose complexion long years of lamp-smoke and tobacco-fumes had turned a deep golden-brown, had been given no successor. At Halewitz the reigns of three German emperors seemed to have passed without making any impression

Leo wandered from one article to another, examined and tested everything he took in his hand, never weary of celebrating anew this meeting again with old acquaintances.

Suddenly there arose in the hall a noise like the rush of a whirlwind, a concert of yapping, barking, and growling. The door flew open, and the whole pack rushed in, quite off their heads for joy and affection, with tongues lolling out and foam-covered jaws, biting and knocking each other over. They jumped up on him as if they would smother him with their embraces.

Leo took the lead, his yellow-maned, lion-like namesake; then came two fine bulldogs who kept guard in the stable; the Scotch greyhounds whose ancestors his father had got for coursing; the chow, who in furious jealousy bit the others' legs. Even the old fat pug belonging to his mother, that he had never given anything but kicks, would not be left behind in choking and snorting forth a joyous welcome.

But, as is always the case, the least worthy claim the largest share of love, and the wildest demonstrations were made by a young hound, which of course he had never seen before. He managed to leap clean over the shaggy back of the Leonberger on to his master's knee, and began licking his ears with zeal.

Leo shook himself free, laughing, and turned his canine lovers with an upset chair out of the room. Only his namesake was allowed to stay. He stretched himself at his feet with dignified composure, and drank in draughts of the long-lost master's scent, as one who enjoys an unsurpassed delicacy.

Then his mother reappeared. She had taken off her nightcap

and put on a morning gown. The grey hair had been hurriedly smoothed, and there was even a brooch showing under her chin. Like all mothers when their sons come back to them from distant countries, she asked him if he was hungry.

No, he said; he was only tired. A pleasant sensation of slackness had taken possession of his limbs. Three hours' sleep, and then the work of managing the neglected estate should begin.

But where was Johanna all this time—she who had first caught sight of him? Surely she could not have gone to bed without giving him a welcome?

The question seemed to embarrass his mother. "She asked you to excuse her," she answered, "because she didn't feel quite prepared to meet you . . . at least——"

"Now, upon my word, little mother! How long is it since preparations have been necessary between Johanna and me?"

For answer, his mother made a wry face, and, taking his hand in hers, stroked it gently.

"There is something wrong here too," he thought, and resolved to investigate the matter thoroughly, early the next morning.

But the mother, whose memory was short, began laughing again. "What a big beard you've grown!" she said admiringly; "and how close-cropped your hair is! And you are brown, oh, so brown; you look exactly as if you had come from the manœuvres."

And while she fondled him, her gaze rested on him in a shy scrutiny. There was an undertone of anxiety in her manner despite her proud tenderness. He had come home as a kind of prodigal son. His soul had fed on husks, and yet he had thrived on them withal. Between mother and son there was much that was difficult to speak of, and what was most difficult of all would have to remain unspoken.

"I will go and see if your bed is ready," she said, rising, and combing the ends of his beard with her hand in passing.

As she opened the door into the next room, which was in darkness, she started back with a cry, answered by a simultaneous, only more alarmed exclamation from the other side. At the same instant Leo saw a glimmer of something white, and then another, disappear into the darkness.

Mamma turned to him, and said, with a titter, "It was the girls."

The lovely double picture that he had seen on the terrace rose before his eyes.

"Come in," he called out, and stood up as if he were going to the door.

But his mother stopped him, laughing. "For goodness' sake, let them run away to bed," she said. "They were in their night-gowns."

V

THE first grey shafts of dawn that shone through the curtains of the girls' bedroom were beginning to take a rosy hue. The starlings had begun to chatter outside the window, and the young swallows trilled softly in the eaves. A mighty volume of sound, coming from the courtyard, seemed for a moment to fill the whole universe with noise and unrest, and then, with three single resounding strokes, to come to an end.

While Elly slept on, with rounded cheek and right ear resting in the hollow of her hand, in undisturbed slumber, Hertha lay with wide-open eyes, holding the counterpane between her teeth, and let the clang of the call-bell, which generally used to hunt her out of bed at once, die on her ear.

She had not been able to go to sleep again after the night's great event. Elly, when the first outbreak of joy was over, and after she had hazarded a few guesses as to what "presents" her brother had brought with him, had nestled her head down on the pillows peacefully, but Hertha had stayed in a sitting position, thinking and thinking without ceasing.

Often she had pictured to herself what this home-coming ought to be, and now it had happened quite differently from what she had expected. Everything always did happen differently from what you expected. So much wisdom her young life had taught her long ago. It dated from the day when her beautiful mother had been carried away from her in her shroud.

Papa was dead too, and Hertha thanked God for that often. There was a hardness in her nature which made her lips snap together at the thought of him. Now she was living amongst strangers, and felt herself at home. Her stepmother's people had become her own.

Her guardian, satisfied that she was being well brought up at Halewitz, contented himself with the management of her fortune, and didn't trouble himself about her. Mamma went her own way also, living a solitary life, seeing scarcely anybody but the poor people's children, whom she gathered about her every day. Then there was grandmamma. Dear old granny, she scolded a good bit. She

scolded in the morning and scolded in the evening, but her scolding was sheer love, and after all you ended by doing what you liked. And, of course, that was nothing wrong. On the contrary, you had an object in life, for which you planned and worked and fought; which was your last thought at night before going to sleep and seeing dream-pictures; for the sake of which you tumbled half blind out of bed when the morning bell sounded its first hard clanging notes. The dairy, the poultry-yard, and the vegetable garden. These were her little kingdom, over which she had ruled for more than a year now, since grandmamma had abdicated and given over the management of them to her. She hadn't had to beg long, for it seemed only natural that the tired, lax fingers of the old lady should drop the reins and confide them to her strong brown paws. She was passionately devoted to riding, yet the superb Lithuanian mare, which had once belonged to Leo, was now left at peace in the stable. She could drive like a goddess, but for months she had not taken the four-in-hand ribbons between her fingers, for this reason more than anything else—that she had lost her pleasure in it. . . . Had she not plunged into a world of responsibility and cares? She looked back on her work with genuine pride. Now it was coming to an end, for *he* had come home.

She had laid the foundation of what he to-day would sit in judgment upon. She jumped out of bed and slipped into her petticoats. As she pulled back one of the curtains she saw the garden stretched out before her in the rosy glow of early morning. Night still brooded in the heart of the dark limes, but on the lawn lay the ruddy-gold reflection of early sunlight. She opened a window-lattice softly and breathed in the cool dewy morning air. A little shiver ran down her naked arms. She then placed herself before the looking-glass, which stood between the two windows, and was hung with flowered chintz and ornamented with a gilded pine-cone, and as she combed her long chestnut-brown, rather coarse hair, she subjected herself to a searching examination.

Never before had she been so unpleasantly alive to the thinness of her shoulders, and the undeveloped childish curves of her bosom, which were scarcely perceptible above the grey calico corset. Neither was the brown slender throat, on which her small quickly-turning, serpent-like head was posed so firmly and haughtily, at all to her taste to-day. Her arms were plentifully adorned with scars and scratches. They were without roundness, and the keen morning air had given them a goose-skin appearance.

"Simply hideous!" exclaimed Hertha. Then she hastily got into a scarlet blouse, which, in honour of the day, she fastened with a spray of sparkling garnets, and ended by thinking that she looked quite passable.

As she opened the door into the corridor, her heart began to beat fast. At any moment she might meet him.

The courtyard was busier than usual at this time of the morning, when she went to the stable for the milking. Excited little groups stood at the doors, and a groom or two were running up and down anxiously between the carriages, as if the threatened storm were already bursting over their heads.

She was on the point of entering the cow-shed, where the straining-tubs were already rattling, when a suddenly born sense of shame prevented her. Would it not look as if she, in her unbidden zeal, were pushing herself before him? But she suppressed the feeling as weakness. People must do their duty without looking to right or left.

The milkmaids' work was in full swing. The white streaks of milk shot with a hissing sound into the tilted pails. She walked down the line, and found that there was nothing for her to do. No one turned to look at her. It had always been her wish that no one should interrupt their work to bid her good morning.

To-day her inactivity made her feel somehow excessively foolish. If only some one would have beaten her cow so that she might thunder a rebuke, it would have been a relief. But all went on greased wheels; the udders were sprinkled with tepid water, the milking hands shone with cleanliness. Fortunately, a red brindle would not stand still, and stamped with its hind hoof at the pail. She fetched quickly a little bag of sand kept for the purpose, and laid on the restless animal's back. As she did so, she looked nervously in the direction of the stable door. Suppose he was to come in now, she would be ready to sink into the earth. "Who are you?" he might ask. "The Mamselle?" "No; I am . . . so and so." "And what brings you here?" he would ask further. "Is this fit work for Countess Prachwitz?" In short, it would be altogether dreadful.

It seemed to her that a pretty Dutch cow with a clever deer-like head, that was one of her favourites, was seriously distended. She thought that while in the meadow it must have been allowed to graze on a patch of poisonous clover. She called the cowherd, reproved him, and charged him to keep his eye on the animal for the rest of the day. If necessary, he was to send for help, in order that the throat-syringe might be inserted.

While the white foamy steaming contents of the first pails were being poured into the milk-strainers, a voice suddenly was heard outside, the resonant tone of which made her blood freeze in her veins.

It was he! Since midnight that voice had rung in her ears, but the laugh which had given it a cheery sound then was absent from it now. It was he! In another moment, perhaps, he would be standing in the stable doorway.

She waited, clinging to a post and setting her teeth. But he did not come. He ordered a horse to be brought out, and his words of fault-finding and command darted hither and thither like lightning-flashes.

The milkmaids, too, heard the master's voice. Some knew it, and those who didn't could not be in a moment's doubt as to whom it belonged. They nudged each other with their elbows, and their faces expressed alarm.

When Hertha heard the sound of horse's feet dying away beneath the courtyard gateway, she ventured to look out at the door. Of him she could not see much, but he was riding on her white mare. On her mare! What joy!

She watched the measuring of the milk with an absent eye. One part of it went to Münsterberg in the milk-cart, a second portion came up to the house, a third was for the farm servants. The mid-day and evening milking supplied the cheese-makers. When all was finished, she stepped again into the morning air. The sun, which had risen above the haystacks, cast its fiery beams on the yard. Down by the pond, where the velvet bulrushes glistened with silvery dew, ducks were quacking. The dogs struggled, straining on their chains, to get to her. She took no notice of them. She passed the brewery, from which proceeded a stream of barm which filled the surrounding air with a cellar-like odour, and entered the open fields by the back gate. Here a few patches of wheat had been cut because they came handy to Uncle, but farther away the corn stood over-ripe with rotting ears.

In thought she followed Leo's ride with an anxious conscience; as if she were to blame for all the mischief. He must have come by this spot and that, and found one as neglected as the other. Ground had been left from last winter unploughed. Oats had been sown too late; the clover was nearly overgrown by grass and weeds.

Amongst the stubble glittered a fine spangle of cobwebs, spreading a prescience of autumn over the flat stretches of land. A wild cat with head ducked forward was slinking along the furrows. Hertha was vexed that she hadn't a gun with her so that she might singe the good-for-nothing's fur.

Then gradually her zeal evaporated, and a gentle dreaminess stole over her. She saw him again us she had always seen him ever since grandmamma had begun to enchant her eyes by drawing his picture. Pale, melancholy, fiery-eyed, rushing in a frenzy of restlessness about foreign countries, tormented by the shade of the slain; hunted from pillar to post by nostalgia and vain longing for rest and peace.

For long she had believed herself chosen by Heaven to be his good angel. She was not exactly clear how and when this revelation had come to her. Perhaps it was when Elly told the story at school

of his duel, of his detention in a fortress, and afterwards of his flight over sea. This duel had been the first romance she had heard of in real life, at a time when she hardly knew that there was such a thing as romance. Then afterwards grandmamma had taught her to hold her virgin heart in reserve for the far-away son.

And now he had come, and although she had not yet seen him face to face, one thing she was sure of, and that was that he did not resemble the picture of him she cherished in her heart. Both his laughter yesterday and his severity to-day distressed her in an equal degree. Her pale wandering hero could never have laughed like that, and such an expletive as "swinish lot" would certainly not have come from his lips. A dull sense of disappointment slowly overcame her, and heightened her fear of him.

And while she skirted the dewy plantation, she saw him in the far distance galloping over the fields on her mare. One minute he flashed in view like a brilliant phantom, the next he was hidden behind the sheaves. Schumann, the head bailiff, followed him on his roan at a respectful distance. Horse and rider resembled each other—they both looked discomfited and dejected.

Now and then Leo beckoned him to his side, as if demanding an account of something. Then he would leave him contemptuously behind again. Hertha fancied she could see the pig-headed way in which the fellow with the sandy beard let the wrath of the returned master pour down on him.

She stood on tiptoe and craned her neck. Fury overwhelmed her, too, when some specially disgraceful piece of neglect came under surveillance. She whistled between her closed teeth, and flourished her fist in the air as if she held a riding-whip. As she did not wish to encounter him at any price, she took a sharp turn to the left towards an enclosed alder-marsh, where some young cattle were grazing. There she could hide till he had gone by.

She had her favourites amongst this humble herd too; and they used to come and thrust their muzzles on her shoulder to be caressed. She rubbed their woolly foreheads now, thinking of but one thing all the time. "He is here." Then suddenly she heard him coming. She started, and then crouched down behind a stumpy bush.

The mare champed under the stinging pressure of the curb. It walked as if it were stepping on glass.

"My poor animal, you are having a bad time of it," thought Hertha.

And then she looked at him. The peaked cap pushed back on the nape of his neck, his brow pouring with perspiration, the veins standing out in knots on his temples, his glance stern; thus he rode up to the fence. A tyrant, every inch of him!

Hertha did not see the fair glossy beard, the erect figure, and graceful seat, or any of the things which maidens are accustomed to take notice of in their cavaliers. She was too overcome by a paralyzing fear and growing defiance of one who was to be a greater power than herself.

He drew rein, and the tightly curbed horse shied at the wooden fence.

"What have we got there?" he inquired, in a grim voice of command.

Hertha began to tremble. Had his angry eyes discovered her behind the bushes? Was he going to treat her as a common trespasser on his property?

But his question concerned the bailiff, who came riding to his side.

"Bullocks—thirty-two head," he reported, with quite military precision.

"How old?"

"The youngest, one year; the oldest, a year and six months."

"And they have been left out over-night on the marsh?"

Schumann muttered a crushed "Yes."

"Confounded mismanagement;" and he rode on.

"He's right," thought Hertha; but she could no longer muster up a feeling of complete triumph.

The breakfast-bell sounded, and, hesitatingly, she turned her steps towards the house.

"Let what may happen," she said to herself, "he won't eat me."

And so she entered the breakfast-room bravely and full of good intentions.

A silent group was gathered there. He sat in the master's place with his head bowed in his hands, his morning paper spread out on the table. He was not reading it, but gazing before him, lost in thought. Elly, in white nainsook and blue ribbons (like a May Queen, thought Hertha, jealously), had folded her hands in her lap, and wore an indescribably dashed expression. Grandmamma, with sighs, was brewing the coffee; mamma was not there.

Grandmamma came to meet her, took her by the hand, and said—

"Here is Hertha, Leo dear."

There was a slight reproach in her voice as she said this, which didn't please Hertha at all.

He gave her a quick glance, which measured her from head to toe, and his face brightened a little. He got up lazily, and held out his hand.

"I hope that you are happy here, my dear Hertha," he said.

"So I am to be graciously patronized," she thought, with increasing bitterness, as she laid her hand silently in his. She had seldom felt so conscious of being an orphan as at this minute.

"You have a good firm handshake," he went on, smiling; "I believe we shall be friends."

She felt she was blushing, and wished earnestly that she could think of some smart retort, but nothing occurred to her.

"And now let us be jolly, children!" he exclaimed, clapping his hands. "It's no use wearing one's self out with worrying. Here, you whitewashed one, give me some coffee."

Elly pouted, and Hertha thought, "Ha, ha! she's caught it."

But her turn came next.

"Well, little girl," he went on, leaning back in his chair, "mother tells me wonderful things about you. You do the work of a bailiff."

"Of a housewife, you mean," she replied; and then blushed deeply, for she felt that she had said something silly.

"Oh, indeed," he laughed, and shook his finger at her, "not quite so far as that yet. You are not in such a hurry to become housewives, are you, children?"

Hertha drew herself rigidly erect. Her lips trembled with anger.

"I like work," she said, "and people who scoff at it are those who have forgotten the way to work."

He put down his coffee-cup, which had been halfway to his mouth, in sheer amazement, and stared at her silently for a moment. Then he said—

"Upon my soul! You seem to be a snappish little lady. I must take care in future."

Grandmamma now came to the rescue. Anxiously she took the girl's head between her dear old hands.

"She doesn't mean it," she said, and smoothed her over eyes and mouth, as if she would fain have wiped out the naughty speech.

Hertha was sorry with a feeling of dull regret; but she would rather have bitten her tongue out than let a word of apology pass her lips.

Conversation did not flow easily again, and Hertha, before she had emptied her second cup of coffee, ran off as if she were a hunted animal. When she reached her room, everything seemed to swim before her in a damp mist.

She went to her glass and said to herself, "I really didn't mean to be rude."

Elly came after her. She scarcely knew at first what to say as she stood there in her finery, looking so round and pretty with her pink cheeks and innocent blue eyes. At last she said—

"You were simply odious. I could never have been so odious;" and she glanced down lovingly at her ribbon bows.

VI

LEO stayed alone with his mother. The morning sunlight danced on the coffee table's snowy damask, the silver hot-water kettle hummed and hissed, and the smoke from Leo's cigar rose lightly in transparent rings to the ceiling.

"I don't know how it is," said the old lady, sighing and stroking back the wavy grey hair from her forehead, "it may be wrong of me, but I can't be as happy this morning as I ought to be. First it is one thing and then another."

"Never mind, little mother," he said; "it will soon be all right. My goods have certainly been squandered. . . . No, no, I don't blame you for it. If any one's to blame, I am. What did I keep away so long for? Ulrich wrote strongly enough. But I was an ass and would not heed. There's time yet, thank God! I have not unlearnt the way to work, as that shrewish little girl hinted just now."

"You are unjust to her," the mother said, defending Hertha hotly. "One should not take everything young girls say too literally. You should look into their hearts instead. And this young heart, Leo, I know for a fact, is full of you—you alone and no other."

"How do I come to be so honoured?" he asked with a laugh.

She made an arch grimace and laid her hand caressingly on his.

"You know what her position is? When Johanna's husband died—I don't want to say anything against him—his soul may rest in peace—but——"

"It is all the same to me," Leo interrupted. "But I must say that I should like to get a glimpse of Johanna herself."

His mother appeared distressed and painfully moved. "Wait a little longer," she said hesitatingly; "she will come down soon."

"Now then, out with it!" he commanded. "Directly I ask after her, you evade the question. Ulrich, too, threw out hints, and she herself is avoiding me. The matter must be cleared up instantly."

"She avoids everybody," complained his mother, with tears in her eyes. "Johanna is quite altered, you would scarcely know her. I should never have thought it possible any nature could have

become so gloomy. You know, my dear boy, that I am not irreligious myself. I believe in God and the Lord Jesus, and that I shall meet your father again in an eternal world. Most firmly do I believe it."

"Yes, mother dear, I know you do," Leo answered, bending his lips over her hand. A child-like joyousness dwelt in her simple heart which kept all doubt miles away.

"But you see," she went on, "Johanna goes to an extreme, which makes one almost anxious. She has had an altar put up by her bed, and a marble crucifix hangs on the wall, as if she were a Catholic. I have found her before it often, fallen asleep in her clothes, when I have gone into her room in the morning. She has given up all society. She doesn't come down when there are guests here, and we ourselves often don't see her all day long. Then she has started a school for infants; old Lange is getting feeble, so it relieves him. She sings and prays with the little ones, and in winter she makes soup for them. And that is the only intercourse she has with any one."

"How long has this been going on?" he asked, frowning.

"It is nearly two years now," his mother answered. "Yes, it was when the girls left school and came home. I sent Elly there because it was Hertha's school, and I wanted the girls to become friends, and thought it would be nice to have Hertha in the house to make her home with us."

"Why have you taken up this Hertha?" he asked. "Your interest in the girl seems to me rather suspicious."

The old lady flushed like a maiden of sixteen. And as she looked up at him with her merry eyes full of truth and candour, she said almost apologetically—

"Leo dear, you know."

"No, really I don't," he answered, laughing.

Then she began to divulge her plans to him in detail. Hertha's maternal fortune was enormous, not by any means to be underrated; and there was only one drawback to the property she owned, and that was its being in Poland. Her mother before her marriage had fallen out with the family, and had to go to law with her own brother for her possessions. Through that all intercourse between Hertha and her Polish relations had been cut off. The only person to be consulted on the bestowal of her hand was her guardian, the old Judge Wessel.

"I have never met the old gentleman," she continued, "but we write to each other twice a year the most friendly letters. So there is nothing to fear from that quarter. I assure you, Leo, that you have only to raise your little finger, and the richest heiress in the country will be your wife."

She paused triumphantly. But instead of answering, he whistled his favourite Mexican air "Paloma" and smiled into vacancy.

His mother was hurt. "I have taken so much trouble to arrange it," she said. "It has cost me thousands of sleepless nights, and you don't even repay me with 'thank you.'"

"It takes two people to make a marriage, my mother," he replied. "I am an elderly good-for-nothing. I have been a vagabond, absentee landlord, and I am packed full of sins up to my throat. And she—she is a child."

"Next spring she will be seventeen," was the answer.

"Well, then, I say 'thank you,'" he said standing up, "and when I am out of the hole I am in at present, we will, perhaps, return to the subject."

The mother strongly objected. He would thus give her time to lose her heart to some foolish youth, who would fill her head with nonsense. Had she not been specially designed for him? Didn't she rave about him, and dream about him before she had even seen him? Was she, now that he had come back, to be repulsed and slighted?

"But perhaps she doesn't attract you," she went on in an anxious tone. "Or there is some one else—some one you have fallen in love with away, or even secretly married? Are you going to bring a creole here as your wife, or one of those ladies who knock about the world in search of adventures? I tell you, Leo, that if you do, I shall take to my bed and die."

He did his best to reassure her. He had come home as free as when he went away, and had done once for all with affairs of the heart.

She wiped her eyes, but the tears would well forth afresh.

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" she sobbed, and stroked his hand with trembling fingers.

"What is the matter?" he asked gently.

But he knew well enough. Since the day he received his sentence he had not seen her face to face, and in this moment her mother's heart was living through again the world of sorrow which her son's wildness had once created for her.

"Stop crying, mother," he implored.

"Ah! what have I not suffered for your sake?" she wailed. "Why did you go and shoot Rhaden dead? Rhaden, who was an intimate friends of ours, and Felicitas's husband besides, so a kind of relation."

He reminded her that it was Rhaden and no other who had challenged him.

"But couldn't you have shot in the air?" she inquired. "It is so often done."

"You don't understand, dear," he answered. "If I had been brought home dead, you would have had even a greater trial to bear on my account. Rhaden, you know, never jested."

She knew, indeed, that his aim was unerring, and realised for the first time the danger which had hovered over her son. She patted his cheeks, full of anxiety, as if even to-day she might be robbed of him.

"You are right; you are right!" she murmured. "I told Felicitas so when she accepted him. He was always a cruel, revengeful character."

"Don't abuse him, mother," he said seriously. "He is dead—and when we have had it out once for all, let us leave this ugly story alone for ever. It has cost every one concerned a good slice of their life's happiness. It is time that we buried it."

She wiped the tears out of the corners of her eyes and looked once more placid content.

"I may talk of Felicitas, I suppose?" she asked.

"Why not?" he said undecidedly, and examined his tobacco-stained finger-nails.

"What do you think of that marriage?" she broke forth. "Fancy Uli? Who would have thought of such a thing?"

"Well, why shouldn't he marry?"

"But it was so extraordinary. He,—your best friend."

"He has my blessing." Leo spoke abruptly, and was in haste to get on to another topic. "How comes it," he asked, "that your intercourse with Felicitas is entirely over? My—my misfortune with Rhaden was not the reason?"

"Oh no, not in the least," she replied. "When you were gone we associated the same as before, for we said to ourselves that we poor women oughtn't to suffer more than was necessary for the men's sake. It told upon us all heavily. I won't speak of myself. Johanna appeared in deep mourning, for she had just buried her husband. Lizzie was so desolate and in need of help, and so we comforted each other. It was not till Lizzie's engagement to Ulrich began to be talked about, that there was an estrangement. I don't know exactly why—for we all congratulated her. But just before the wedding, she and Johanna quarrelled. The reason has never come out, for you know how Johanna can be as silent as the grave. The day it happened Felicitas drove away, deadly pale, without saying good-bye, and has never been here since. Johanna vowed that she would rather die than go to the wedding, and prayed me not to go. And when any one begs me not to do a thing . . . well you know——"

"Yes, I know, mummy," he said, and caressed her hair compassionately.

She had always given in to his strong-willed sister. There was silence. He bit at the ends of his beard and meditated.

"Oh, rubbish!" he exclaimed on a sudden, and jumped to his feet. "Be courageous and repent nothing. That is the whole secret of life."

"What do you mean, my son?" his mother asked nervously.

For answer, he kissed her on the forehead and seized his cap. But at this moment the door opened and a tall, nun-like figure, dressed in unrelieved black, stood on the threshold.

He glanced at her quickly, then recoiled. Could this be Johanna? Her beauty, her youth—what had become of them?

Motionless, and without showing a sign of pleasure, she stood before him, and did not even stretch out her hand to him.

"Johanna!" he cried, and was going to embrace her.

But she only offered him her forehead to kiss slowly and unwillingly as if performing a great sacrifice, and it seemed to him that she shuddered under the touch of his lips.

This was the reception his pet sister, his childhood's companion, chose to give him after a separation of six years.

He tried with his ready humour to master the situation. "I have gone through a lot, Hannah, since I saw you last," he said laughing. "I have been received in various odd ways in different parts of the globe. With bullets, with poisoned arrows, with rotten eggs, with sour mare's milk, and I don't know what else. But such a welcome as this is altogether novel in my experience."

Her blue-rimmed, melancholy eyes, sunk deeply in her thin haggard face, gazed at him gloomily and searchingly.

"You have been away a long time," she said, and sat down.

"Yes; that is true."

"And you have kept your splendid health and spirits."

"Yes; I have kept in capital health, thank you."

There was a pause. He regarded her more and more as a stranger. A grim, inscrutable stoniness seemed to have frozen her nature. She had evidently nursed and cultivated an old grief with an egoism that had become fanatical. And then, as he recalled all the vanished splendour of her beauty, and looked at the emaciated throat and angular shoulders which made the flatness of her bust the more apparent, pity and his old love for her gained the upper hand. What must she have suffered to have so changed in appearance?

"We can't go on like this, Hannah," he said. "If I have done anything to displease you, speak out and let us make it up."

For a moment a kindlier glance shot from her eyes. But he fancied it meant that she pitied him, and so he was not reassured.

However, he did not wish to rely on conjecture. He would try and put things on the old hearty footing between them.

"Look here!" he said, "it is plain that your soul is cherishing some old grudge. You and I always held to one another. Can't you feel the old confidence in me again? Tell me what your trouble is, and see if I can't heal the wound."

"It seems to me that you stand in greater need of healing than I do," she answered, without taking her sphinx-like eyes off him.

"How so?" he asked, and plunged his hands into his trouser-pockets, stretching his legs wide apart as he planted himself in front of her.

"I have often asked myself, Leo, what sort of man you would become back. I hoped you might appear before us serious and subdued, a little burdened by the consciousness of what you had brought upon yourself and us. Often enough I have prayed God that it might be so. But instead you are—are—— Aye, what you are any one can see with half an eye."

"Well, what am I?" he asked, hardening into an attitude of scoffing amusement.

"I can only hope, for your own sake," she went on, "that your conduct is not real, but a mask, that behind there is something more than one would suppose from your plump, happy face. But if you are not acting and deceiving us, if in reality you are so thoroughly satisfied with yourself, then, dear Leo, it would have been better if our mother had never borne you."

"But, Johanna!" their mother exclaimed, running between them in horror.

"Leave her alone, mummy," he said. "You see she is over-strung. You prepared me for it yourself."

"Have patience with her," the mother entreated softly.

"I have, haven't I?" he laughed. "If I hadn't learnt by this time to put up with a few feminine vagaries, I should indeed be incorrigible. I am not so thin-skinned, and when you choose, my dear sister, to adopt a more reasonable tone towards me we shall be friends again. Does that suit you, eh?"

She looked at him and did not speak.

He flung out of the room and the door banged behind him. He stood for a moment in the outer hall and drew a deep breath. His sister's immovable, sphinx-like glance had oppressed him like a nightmare. A vague suspicion began to dawn within him, but he struggled against it.

"Now for work!" he exclaimed, and he shook his fists in the air.

VII

THE worst of it all was, that the crops were ripe for harvest, but could not be cut, because there were not enough hands for the labour.

Uncle Kutowski, whom Leo wanted to call to account for this, was nowhere to be found. He had not been seen since early morning, when he had driven off in his one-horse chaise. Leo learnt how matters stood from Schumann, who was officiously obliging in giving information.

The old man, it would seem, was in the habit of levying fines, which added not a little to his salary, so that the foreign reapers who let themselves out on hire in gangs, long before the beginning of the harvest, had been so exasperated by deductions made on their wages, that last pay-day they had packed their bundles and decamped in the night.

The home farm-labourers who were available were not capable of the work, and so it had been at a standstill for eight days. Half the crops were likely to be ruined in consequence, but the old steward felt no qualms on that score, and did not let the prospect of a spoilt harvest weigh on his mind.

This alone was enough to give Leo an insight into what sort of hands the management of his property had fallen for the last four years. He would have liked to horse-whip his uncle and send him packing without further parley, but, unfortunately, those who have been accomplices in our past sins, have to be gently dealt with, lest they betray secrets. He recognized the fact, in wrath and shame, that he had put himself, to a great extent, at the mercy of the old reprobate. Nevertheless, bold and resolute action might yet set him free.

He gave orders at the gatehouse that Herr Kutowski was to be sent to him so soon as he should show his face in the yard again. Then he shut himself up in his study.

Here, everything was the same as of old. In the embrasure of the window, there stood an ancestral bequest, in the shape of a huge escritoire, finely carved, with inlaid mother-of-pearl drawers, where many secrets lay hid. The walls were decorated with groups of

pistols, sporting weapons and coats-of-arms, surrounded artistically with antlers, tusks, and bullet-ridden discs—trophies of boyish sportsmanship which once he had regarded with reverence, but which now hardly won a smile from him. Many an idle hour had he lounged away at one time of his life, on the old couch by the door, with its slippery, shabby leather covering, and dreamed of forbidden things. Over there were photographs of his nearest and dearest ones. Mamma, with a lace tippet over her long-waisted bodice, papa with epaulets and a general's whiskers. Pastor Brenckenberg, before he had grown puffy and bloated, when he had lived in the house as tutor, and ruled him with the cane. Then there was Johanna before she did up her hair, with white worsted stockings gleaming beneath her short skirts; Ulrich, as an upper third-form boy, round-backed as a fiddle-bow, with long hair and pigeon-breast. By him—strange coincidence—Felicitas, in budding maidenhood, with masses of curly hair and a languishing smile.

The picture dated from the days when, as distant cousin, she had come to stay at Halewitz, and when he had fallen head over ears in love with her. Ulrich had followed his example, and Johanna had been annoyed. He grasped his brow. Was it all a dream? A shudder ran through him. He who had once believed himself to be master of his fate, saw himself tossed like a cork on the waves, and now in sport cast up on the shore.

Breathing hard, he set to work on the accounts. Hours went by. He sat bowed over the ledgers adding up, and for the first time in his life he added up right. It was worse than he feared. Shock followed shock, but none was pleasant.

And in the midst of his reckoning a sudden burning blush of shame flooded his face. He read, "Sent to Monte Carlo 10,000 marks." And a few lines further on: "To Monte Carlo 141,500 marks."

How could he reproach others when he himself had been a mere common gambler? Was it not natural, that every man should try to grab his share out of the universal bankruptcy? But he felt that in this memorandum it was not so much his wretched property, as his friend's honour and peace of mind that was most at stake. It was for this he was determined to fight the old scoundrel. For a moment he let his eye linger on the opposite wall where the arms hung, and then he started on the figures again. The affair seemed to grow ever more and more complicated. It was almost inconceivable that, with expenditure always on the increase, and ever shrinking profits, a balance could be maintained. "The sequestrator must have been at home here for a long time," he muttered.

Altogether the actual accounts were in apple-pie order. Who could wonder? Everywhere amongst the uncle's hen-scratchings,

Ulrich's beautiful clear signature proved how religiously his friend had performed his weekly duties as auditor. Only on the left-hand margin was entered here and there a certain mysterious sum of money, unendorsed, and specified among the receipts as "Interest called in by Herr Baron von Kletzingk." It ran each time to several thousand marks, and the total would have been a fortune.

"When did I ever lend money on interest?" cried Leo, striking his forehead on which started great beads of anxious sweat.

And the further he proceeded the oftener, with uncanny regularity, did the sum stare him in the face. It invariably occurred at a convenient juncture to cover some heavy outlay, or to help meet a long-standing bill. It presided over the columns as a *deux ex machinâ*, a blessing and friend in need.

The one person who could have thrown light on the bewildering problem was Uncle Kutowski, who still made himself scarce.

"If he owns up," Leo concluded, "I will let him off lightly. If not, it will be life or death."

Towards five o'clock, the old gentleman's one-horse trap drew up at the bailiff's house. He was lying back in a corner, tight as a drum, sucking the end of his burnt-out cigar.

Old Christian, who on Leo's behalf had been on the look-out for him, helped him to alight, and informed him that the master wished to speak to him at once.

Herr Kutowski poured out a volley of abuse which echoed over the courtyard.

"What has the youngster taken into his head? Am I his shoeblack, that he should order me about like this? He had better be careful. I'll teach him who I am, and what I know."

Christian, greatly scandalized to avert a further outbreak, hurried off to tell his master of the steward's arrival. Fortunately no one had been near to overhear his disrespectful words.

Uncle Kutowski swaggered with jingling spurs into his apartments, to indulge in a well-earned siesta. He surveyed himself in the cracked shaving mirror, which satisfied the small demands of his vanity, and had a long conversation with himself, from which it might have been gathered that he wished to be regarded as the lawful possessor of Halewitz.

Then he cleared off the remains of a ham-bone, which lay on the table with some blacking, a dirty pack of French cards, a cocoa-tin filled with tobacco, and a pig's bladder; he kicked a couple of empty beer-bottles off the sofa, which creaked at every touch like a hungry crow, and was just going to fling himself full-length on the horsehair cushions when the door opened and Leo walked into the room.

"It's the custom for people to knock before they come in here,

my boy," the old man screamed in greeting. "Remember that in future."

Leo made no response, but calmly turned the key in the lock and then put it in his pocket.

"Now, uncle," said he, "we will have a talk."

There was a certain friendly decision in his manner, which did not impress the old man pleasantly. Still he was going to show that he had not drunk himself into a courageous frame of mind for nothing.

"Quite right, my dear boy," he said, leaning back with a lofty air. "You have come to apologise to your old uncle, which is only what I should have expected of you, considering how we are related to one another."

"I wish to remind you, my dear uncle," said Leo, "that, at the present moment, you are still in my service."

"Eh, what! Service!" sneered the old man. "I spit at your service."

And he spat.

"I am not asking you why, on my first day at home, you have taken the first opportunity of getting drunk, because I think I pretty well understand your temperament. I ask you only, whether you would rather sleep it off first, or whether you feel in a position to answer my questions straight away."

"What do you mean by in a position?" the old fellow snarled. "I am in a position to answer anything—that is to say, if I choose."

"Very well, then," said Leo; "in that case I am here as your master, and I must request you to stand before me."

"What! What! I stand?"

"Get up!" said Leo, and lifting the sofa in the air, he shook the old man off it, as if he were shaking a cat out of a feather-bed. Then he gave the worm-eaten piece of furniture a mighty kick, and with a grinding sound it fell to pieces.

The old man reeled against the table and gave Leo the crafty, savage look of a wild boar at bay.

"I'll remember this of you," he growled.

"I quite see," Leo went on, "that it is useless to try and get you to render me an account of my financial affairs, . . . and that is not what I have come about. It is true that you have succeeded in playing the deuce with a large amount of my property, and the rest I shall have to put in order myself, to the best of my ability. Schumann and the accountant will explain the details to me. This much I have already ascertained, that if I thought it necessary, I should have abundance of material with which to put police-inspector Schuster on your track."

"Better and better," the old man said with a laugh of scorn, and began to toy with the pig's bladder.

"But don't think for a moment," Leo continued, "that I intend to do anything of the kind. Not that the relationship between us counts for anything. You could not very well bring more disgrace on my house than you have done during the last four years. Neither would the recollection of our old friendship deter me. I have had to pay dearly enough for it. No, I have another reason for coming here."

"So it seems," scoffed his uncle.

"Look, here, old man; since we met last night it seems to me that you have been trying to intimate by various hints that you hold me in the hollow of your hand, that you have only to open your mouth to bring me to utter ruin, and I don't know what besides. Well, you are mistaken, dear uncle. You think, probably, that you have still the foolish, dissolute youth to deal with, who was once weak enough to let you lead him into all sorts of disreputable scrapes. You haven't the slightest idea who it is stands before you now. Do you know, uncle, what a desperado is? It is a man who has learnt the greatest wisdom in life; which is, that there's nothing in the world he need lose, so long as he doesn't use feeble means to get it, but instead stakes life and death on what he wants,—even if the thing be nothing bigger than a trouser-button. Such a desperado, I have come back to you, my dear uncle, and if you don't stop your damned grinning at once, I'll strike you down like a dog."

He raised his clenched fist, which for a few seconds waved like a swinging axe over the old man's stubby head. His last sneer choked in his throat, and he took a step backwards and crouched in terror against the wall. Then, with a laugh, Leo stuck his hand in his pocket.

"That's a sample for you, uncle," he said. "People shall do what I will have them do, or go to the devil. And now listen again. When I decided to come home, I knew perfectly well what a kettle of fish I should find. And then I looked at my pistols (I have a splendid pair of pistols, uncle dear, but I haven't got them here, because, just at present, I don't need them to take aim at you), and I said to myself, these beggars have helped me out of many a tight corner, where life and death were the stakes, why should I let them rust in old Europe, when the same will be for the most part nothing but a trouser-button. You are a trouser-button, uncle, nothing more or less. Don't be offended. . . . All I insist on is that you hold your tongue! I will have that cursed intrigue (you know which!) buried for ever and ever. Should it come to light, should I hear the slightest indication that you have breathed a word of what

you know, then I shall take out one of my beautiful pistols and blow you into the skies. Do you believe me?"

"Don't joke," stuttered the old man, and squinted towards the door.

"You needn't be frightened, my dear little uncle," Leo laughed. "I told you that I hadn't got them with me. They are not necessary yet; this is only a preliminary warning. When I want you I shall find you, no matter where you may be. I should take a heathenish joy in hunting you down. We learn that sort of sport on the other side, uncle. Do you believe me?"

The old steward cringed further backwards, and clinging to the window-ledge, struggled to speak.

"How can you treat me like this?" he burst forth in half-strangled utterance. "I would go through fire and water for you. I would have cut off my right hand for you, and you shake your fist at me and threaten me with pistol-shots, and all the rest of it."

"Only for a certain emergency, you know," Leo interposed.

"Such suspicion!" went on the old man; "such want of confidence! I have kept as silent as the grave. I would rather have bitten my tongue out than said anything. . . . I have been plagued and racked by conscience all these years, and this is my reward!—this is my reward!"

In utter helplessness he began to cry like a baby. Leo waited till his grief had subsided, and then gave his commands.

By that evening he was to have left the castle, and the neighbourhood by the next morning. In case he should cherish ill-feeling and in consideration of his being a relation, a month's salary should be paid him at some place over the frontier—it was not certain where—probably either at Warsaw or Wilna, so that he might lead a decent life.

The old man said, "Thank you," humbly, and grovelled.

"When shall the carriage be ready, uncle?" asked Leo, opening the door.

Uncle Kutowski said that he had only to pack and to bid the ladies farewell, but if he might be allowed he should like to take a little nap before his departure.

"Sleep away, then, old sinner," said Leo, clapping him on the shoulder; and as his uncle seemed unable to move from the spot, either from emotion or fright, he took him by the arm and led him with gentle care to his bed, where he covered him up with his cloak which hung near on the wall. Then he went his way whistling "Paloma."

Before he sat down to his writing-table again, he ordered Christian to bring up a bottle of the oldest wine in honour of the day, and as he poured out the first glass and held it toward the

youthful likeness of his friend, he said between his clenched teeth—

"Long live brute-force, little girl. It has saved both you and I to-day, from a catastrophe."

The same evening the arrival of the carriage from Uhlenfelde was announced.

He had not expected a visit from his friend so soon, and a thrill of joy and at the same time of alarm ran through him.

The visitor clasped his hand with the old genial pressure, which dispelled at once the anxious presentiment of a moment before. But the pale face wore an excited expression, and the sunset glow which came through the windows was reflected in the feverish glitter of his tired eyes.

"You are not well," said Leo, who read on the familiar features the story of recent mental excitement.

That Felicitas had something to do with it, and his own home-coming, it was not difficult to guess.

"Let me sit down quietly for a few minutes," Ulrich said, pressing his hand against his left side. "I shall be better soon."

He refused Leo's offers of refreshment, and with short hard gasps breathed in the perfumed evening air which was wafted into the room from the garden. When Leo saw him leaning back in his old accustomed place in the corner of the sofa, his heart bounded. How often they had sat together there, making youthful plans, while the grasshoppers chirruped outside, and the solemn quavering strains of a concertina sounded from the stables!

They had often touched on the subject of marriage, and had agreed that their wives must be two bosom friends, or, better still, two sisters, so that their old hearts' intimacy should not be sacrificed.

Nothing seemed changed outwardly to-night. The grasshoppers chirruped; the concertina began timidly, as if uncertain whether it might dare, now the master had come home. And yet everything was different.

"Still I have got *him!*" Leo's soul cried aloud. "And I will not let him slip through my fingers."

"You have seen how things are now with your own eyes," Ulrich said, sitting up. "I am afraid there's not much to congratulate you upon."

"I have found nothing but gross negligence," Leo assented.

"If I may venture to advise you, I should get rid of the old man, despite considerations of kinship and friendship. At all events, he isn't much use to you."

"I have kicked him out already," said Leo.

"So much the better," Ulrich remarked. "One of his worst

feats was last Saturday, when his chicanery drove away the Lithuanian reapers."

"I am quite at sea in that matter," Leo declared. "Unless a miracle happens, the fine harvest will go to the dogs."

"Not quite a miracle is required to save it," replied Ulrich, with his dear old smile, which always seemed to bring comfort and help. "A few days ago I applied to Captain von Quetner in Münsterberg. I begged aid from him. He believed he could meet the emergency, and to-morrow before sunrise twenty-five men, Uhlans, will be brought over here on my waggons."

A wave of gladness swept over Leo. From this moment things would look up. He seized Ulrich's hand in dumb gratitude. But the latter bit his lips, and withdrew from him gently.

"I didn't come to tell you this," he said. "I could have written about that, but there are things to be discussed that cannot be committed to paper. I am sorry to say your prophecy has proved true. It must be all over between you and me. A woman has separated us. My marriage has demanded the sacrifice of our friendship."

Leo stared at him, unable to speak.

"Don't misunderstand me," Ulrich went on, struggling painfully with his words. "I needn't assure you that I love you to-day as much as I ever did. I fear that this separation may be my death-blow. Nevertheless, it must be."

"Because your—your wife desires it?" asked Leo, in growing bitterness.

"Don't call me weak, and abuse me for being a slave to a woman," Ulrich answered. "I have never in all my life been tied to apron-strings, and hope I never shall. But I am in the habit of listening to what my conscience dictates. And that insists on my doing my duty by the woman who bears my name and whose child I have made my own."

Leo was eager to know how she had taken the news, but was ashamed to try and glean the information from his friend by crooked questionings; however, as it proved, there was no need, for Ulrich on his own accord told him all he wanted to know.

"I did not think," he said, "that Felicitas, who lives and forgets so rapidly, would have been so deeply moved at your return. I must say that without taking credit to myself. God knows there is no reason why I should. I believed that she had completely got over her grief for the loss of Rhaden. She scarcely ever mentions his name, and even forgets the anniversary of his death. And for two years, I have, as tactfully as I could, endeavoured to impress on her your innocence in that unfortunate accident, . . . for as an accident pure and simple I have always regarded the fatal duel. It

seems that it has all been in vain. The first thing that happened yesterday was that she went into hysterics. I was afraid she was going to be seriously ill. The whole night she sat on the boy's bed, murmuring over him. I got her away early this morning almost by force, for the poor boy, too, was deprived of his night's rest. You wil believe me, dear Leo, when I say that all this makes me bound to admit that she has right on her side."

Leo was silent. If he had spoken it would have been hypocrisy, and he could not bring himself to that.

"When she had become calmer," Ulrich went on, "I told her of our conversation, and of the fears you had entertained about the continuance of our intercourse. I wanted to prove to her by that, how much you had considered the condition of her feelings. But the effect was quite contrary from what I had expected. Especially what you said about the child seemed to excite her to the last degree. Forgive me, dear old boy, if it was a blunder to repeat it. I hoped it would help both you and me. Why should I repeat to you all her expressions of resentment against you? It is unnecessary to tear open old wounds. You may believe me that I know how to distinguish between the hysterical exaggerations to which she gave vent in her grief, and the grief itself. But that is genuine enough, and when she says, 'How can I touch your hand, when I know that to-day it has lain in the hand which struck down my child's father?'—when she says that she is right, a thousand times right. I ought to have foreseen it all, before I linked her fate with mine. Now it is done, and, in your words, it has come to the decision. 'You must choose between me and her.'"

Still Leo was silent. The fatal image of the woman glided before his eyes. It seemed to melt into the gold of the evening clouds, and with the damp mist to fill the darkening world.

How came it that she had been able to rob him of what was dearest to him on earth? And, what was worse than anything else, she was justified. It was only strange that she, who, as a rule, was given to half-measures, and avoided anything like resolute action, had proved herself, in this, almost firmer than he was. But then, of course, she had no friend to lose. . . .

"I thank you, old boy," Ulrich went on, "for not reproaching or laughing at me. Not that any contradiction on your part would have been of the least use. The facts are inexorable, and what we are doing is the only natural course to take."

"Yes," Leo assented, staring out of the window.

If Ulrich had only guessed what truth he was speaking!!

"And now there is nothing more to say, except, as it were, to make my last bequests. When you want me, I shall come to you —at any hour of the day or night, in good or evil fortune. I shall

expect the same from you, even though in ordinary circumstances we shall have no alternative but to pass each other by with a silent pressure of the hand."

"It must be as you decide," said Leo; and he felt a dull aching at his heart.

Ulrich sat rigid and upright, every muscle brought into obedience to the power of his will. His burning eyes rested unwaveringly on his friend's face, as if he would fain absorb him with his gaze. Not once did his voice tremble.

"Just one word more, old boy," he said, "before we part. I have to make an open confession to you concerning a certain matter, and to ask your pardon. You will find in your books the constant occurrence of a sum of money which you will not be able to explain. Interest—called in by—then follows my name."

Leo was all attention.

"The sum comes altogether to sixty-six thousand and a few hundred marks. You know you had no ready money. It fell to my share to save the sinking ship. So I gave what was necessary out of my own means to set it afloat again. . . . Forgive the deception, and don't thank me! No. I won't be thanked," he repeated, as Leo stood up and seemed as if he were going to rush and embrace him. "Anything I have is always at your service. That, of course, is an understood thing. And now good luck and good-bye."

He was making quickly for the door, but at the last moment he was seized with one of those attacks which Leo with dread had seen coming on for several minutes. He fell across the sofa, growing deadly pale. His eyes were fixed, his pulse stood still, and he lost consciousness.

Leo had known these symptoms from earliest youth, and also knew the remedy. As he fell, he had caught Ulrich's head in his arms, and began massaging his scalp vigorously with his finger-tips. After a few seconds the eyes recovered their ordinary expression, a gentle flow of blood mounted to his temples, and he came to himself again.

"Thank you, dear old boy," he said, standing up with a sad smile. "Once more I have lived to experience your skill in casting out the little white mice."

And he seized his hat. Leo begged him to wait till he had quite recovered, but Ulrich refused.

"No loitering," he said; "it will only excite us again, and prolong the agony."

The carriage had driven round to the door. For a moment he let his thin, delicate hand rest tremblingly in Leo's hard palm, then he wrenched himself away.

"Remember me to your people," he said, covering himself with the carriage-rug.

The horses started, and the carriage rolled away with subdued crunching of wheels unto the purple evening dusk.

Leo, half blinded by his rising tears, staggered back unto his study.

"Be sensible . . . no whining . . . don't be an old woman," he cried, preaching courage to himself, for it was right that this should be. Only thus could all be made straight again.

VIII

THE feeling which events had left behind in Hertha's mind was one of dull disappointment. It seemed almost as if she had expended all her trouble on an unworthy object. So long he had existed for her as an exalted sinner, one of those melancholy, mysteriously-guilty, romantic beings, whom it is the delight of a true woman to rescue from hell; and now he stood before her in the flesh—a muscular, laughing country squire, with bull-neck, broad shoulders, and a vocabulary that could only be described as vulgar, though, alas! it certainly had the knack of hitting the right nail on the head. Even his method of dealing with his staff of retainers was quite different from what she had pictured. With the righteous wrath of an outraged deity, she had expected him to scourge the unfaithful servants out of his sight, to mete out to the miscreants their deserts, but to reward those who had been honest and vigilant by giving them an honourable post at his right hand. But now that her dreams had become reality, all was as prosaic as possible. He swore, and the servants slunk about like whipped hounds, and she had not been once consulted.

The hated Uncle Kutowski, too, for whom she would have thought the gallows too good, seemed to be taking his departure in far too easy and comfortable a fashion.

On the second day he appeared, just after breakfast, in freshly ironed linen, and buff *piqué* waistcoat, on which his watch-chain of boars' tusks dangled aggressively, and explained to the ladies that he had come to take his leave of them, in order to enter on a larger sphere of work. In Poland, where formerly he had possessed land, there was a complication of affairs, which, to be put straight, required the firm hand and the knowledge of modern agricultural improvements of a confidential land-agent such as himself.

He set this forth with the utmost self-assurance, and stroked his wavy, greenish-grey beard with true patriarchal dignity; but his little eyes glanced uneasily at the door from time to time, as if he were afraid that Leo might come in and cut off his brilliant retreat. Grandmamma was good-natured enough to accept the old reprobate's explanation without question. Elly gravely went on with her

painting, and Hertha herself could do nothing but show her contempt by shrugging her shoulders, which apparently didn't hurt his feelings in the least. Finally, he had the effrontery to ask the young ladies to give him their photographs, and to wish them handsome bridegrooms. This was a little too much for Hertha.

"I only give my photograph to people whom I have learnt to esteem," said she, drawing herself up, "and if I ever should marry, which I am uncertain about at present, I shall take care to choose a husband who has no associates like yourself, Herr Kutowski."

Now he had got his due, and all grandmamma's tact could not alter it.

He bowed, and with a malicious smile remarked that he always knew that Miss Hertha could not endure him, but that was not here or there. Now the master had come home, she would find out fast enough what it was to be a stranger in the house, and what a true friend she had had in him.

Hertha, hard hit, cast down her eyes. But kind old grandmamma put her arm protectingly round her neck. Whereupon the old gentleman lighted a cigar, thrust a sandwich of buttered rolls into his pocket, squeezed out a few farewell tears, and after Elly, with characteristic meekness, had submitted to having her forehead kissed by his atrocious lips, he retired in the *rôle* of the chivalrous old worthy.

All the morning Hertha carried about with her a sense of intolerable wrong. It was not till she heard Leo, after lunch, say to his mother, "The old uncle, by Jove! has been summarily dismissed," did she feel slightly comforted, and concluded that perhaps, after all, the world had not been made so comfortable for unpunished rogues as she had supposed. Her relations with the returned master of the house somewhat improved. He had addressed a few playful remarks to her at meals, and had taken her retorts with gay good humour. It looked as if he had quite forgotten that she had offended him. "He doesn't think I am grown up," she reflected bitterly. And the idea she had entertained the whole day of asking him formally for forgiveness was gradually abandoned.

It was after tea that he came to her, and in his usual light-hearted and lively manner said: "Now then, little one, if you like, we will do some accounts." She glowed under a swelling wave of pride. At last he had asked her, had felt himself forced to regard her management of certain departments as a serious matter. But she would not have been so proud if she had suspected that grandmamma had hinted to him that it would give her pleasure if he would go over her accounts with her. Her books were in beautiful order. Since yesterday morning she had longed to show him the blue octavo exercise-book, but had not had the courage to do so uninvited.

Now, sitting opposite him, she produced records of her heroic achievements, with flaming cheeks. She had reared and fattened twelve turkeys, and sold ten in Königsberg; she had sent eighty chickens to the Münsterberg market, and got an average price of sixty-five pfennigs apiece for them. The sound eggs that were over had been bought at home by a dealer, so that no deduction had to be made for waste. A greater bargain still was in course of completion for unfattened geese, though some were to be stuffed for the sake of the liver, but the season had not come yet for that.

Then she passed on to the vegetable department. Fresh vegetables were sent every Saturday regularly to the market at Münsterberg, but it scarcely paid to compete with the peasant folk; still, in another direction, a great success had been scored. She got several dozen little baskets plaited from reeds, which a blind man made her for twopence each. These little baskets were daintily arranged with leaves, and filled, according to the season, with strawberries, cherries, and other fruit. The milk-boys offered them for sale in Münsterberg, and they had enjoyed quite a reputation. Three days later, all the little baskets were collected empty, but if any customers wished to keep basket as well as fruit they were to pay threepence more, and this extra penny helped to pay the old blind man.

Her face was radiant with zeal, her hair wild, and her hands trembled as she sat there calculating one sum of money after the other. She would have liked to demonstrate her success by showing him the figures, but no matter how she turned over the leaves, she could not find the total, and the columns swam before her in crazy confusion. And in the midst of her narration she had caught him looking at her with an inquiring, astonished gaze, and she felt a choking sensation of sheer joy in her throat; but she collected herself and proceeded further with her good tidings.

She had come now to the most important thing of all—the milk and the dairy produce. Here, of course, she had not been able to do as much as she wished, for these stupendous affairs came under Uncle Kutowski's management. However, she had got round Schumann, and worked him so effectually that he was willing to help her. The experiment of sending cream in bottles to Königsberg had been a failure, but for slightly salted fresh butter a trade had been opened with Friedrich Graz in Berlin, which was doing first-class business. This did not hinder the morning milk, according to old custom, being despatched by waggon to Münsterberg; and she felt bound to confess with pride that the popularity of the Halewitz fruit-baskets had increased considerably the daily demand for milk. She and the swineherd were at war as to how the butter-milk ought to be used. The Swiss cook at Stoltenhof had given her a famous receipt for making cheese of butter-milk. The Mamselle had made excellent

use of it, yet all the leavings were demanded for the pigs, although they could very well be fed on the husks and refuse from the brewery. Hertha thought these claims preposterous, and hoped that Leo would see that the lion's share of the butter-milk were restored to its proper uses.

And now she had finished, and she laid the blue exercise-book down with modest satisfaction, and went back to grandmamma, who had been listening to her report, beaming with delight.

He followed her, and grasped her industrious little hand with a smile in which there was a gleam of almost paternal emotion.

"You are a plucky little girl," he said. "I am much obliged to you."

That was all. He might, at least, have said that he hoped she would go on and prosper.

She ran out to cool her hot cheeks in the shade of the limes. Her throat felt like lead from her strangled tears. She was depressed by the consciousness that her soul's elated triumph had been followed by a humiliation. She had expected something tremendous, unspeakable. What, she hardly knew herself. At any rate, she need not have been thanked so curtly, almost grudgingly.

Near the obelisk she came on Elly, exercising grandmamma's pug at the end of a blue ribbon, which was not in the least necessary.

She ran to meet Hertha with an air of great importance, saying a terrible misfortune had happened, and her whole future happiness was at stake. She really thought she should have to put an end to herself.

"What *is* the matter?" asked Hertha.

It was this. Christian had reported that this morning a sealed letter addressed to her had been lying on Uncle Kutowski's table, and that now it had disappeared.

"Well, what harm is there in that?" asked Hertha. "You should never have had any secrets with that dreadful old man."

Elly blushed and stuttered. She had not exactly had secrets; it was only that uncle had been so obliging, and the last time she had met Kurt Brenckenberg he had promised that the song he had composed for her should be sent to her through Uncle Kutowski.

"If you will do such stupid things, Mouse," said Hertha, turning her back, "we can't go on being friends."

But Elly threw her arms around her from behind, and entreated and implored her to help her just this once. She would never do it again. And when she had sealed this vow with a solemn kiss and shake of the hand, Hertha consented to do what she could in advising her.

First of all it seemed advisable to reconnoitre the spot where the letter had been seen in the morning.

Hertha made a short cut through bushes and hedge to the

bailiff's house, and Elly, who despite her agitation had not let go of the fat pug, obediently followed.

The bailiff's house was deserted as usual at this hour, and in consequence locked up. The only way to get in was through an open window at the back.

Hertha, who could climb like a squirrel, took the lead and dragged the trembling Elly after her; the pug, who was in danger of being strangled by the blue ribbon, was left behind, and barked as if he were mad at his vanishing mistresses.

They found themselves in Schumann's room, which was filled with an odour of onions and lamp-oil, for the head-bailiff was a bachelor and catered for himself, leaving unspeakable messes simmering for hours on a petroleum cooking-stove.

Elly could scarcely stand for fright, and even Hertha's heart beat perceptibly quicker. Till this moment she had never shrunk timidly from the boldest adventures; but now that the master of Halewitz ruled his possessions again, everything wore a different aspect.

She penetrated further without looking to right or left. The door, which led to the uncle's deserted apartments, was wide open. Within a repulsive spectacle was revealed. In one corner the old sofa lay in ruins, the bedstead was turned up against the wall, the cupboard doors were flung back on their hinges, and in all the places which had been mercifully hidden by carpet and *bric-à-brac*, dirt was laid bare, for the old sloven had let it accumulate for years. Long-legged, hairy spiders sat in the corners, and disturbed silver-grey wood-lice ran out of the cracks in the floor.

On the table, where Christian had caught sight of the fatal letter, lay the cracked shaving-mirror, with the pig's bladder, and odds and ends of tobacco, and all sorts of papers; but the passionately coveted envelope was nowhere to be seen.

Hertha searched the room with the thoroughness of a detective. She tore open the table drawer, threw herself on the floor to spy under bureau and wardrobe; she even shook the top-boots which stood ranged in a row against the wall covered with baize, but not a trace could she discover of the missing letter.

Between the windows, propped against the birchwood chest of drawers, there was an old bookcase, much scratched and ornamented with paintings. Hertha, after a fleeting glance, plucked up courage to examine it closer. Two rows of books stood or lay on the shelves, some of them bound, others in coloured-paper covers.

This, then, was the uncle's library that he had been in the habit of boasting was the most interesting in the world. "When you are particularly nice to me," he would say, "I will invite you to look through it." But there the matter had dropped, for Hertha had

never felt inclined to be "particularly nice" to him. And nc here was this celebrated library without lock or custodian, absolut at her disposal, and hours might go by before one of the inmates the house might surprise her—deep in its treasures. She was delighted, that even the fatal letter was forgotten. Hertha w trembling fingers touched the paper covers, and, looking into t first that lay on the pile, read, "The Adventures of Queen Isabell or, Secrets of the Court of Madrid"—a title which excited h curiosity to the highest pitch.

As time was precious she began to read in the middle of t sentence on which she had chanced to open. Elly, who had be standing about, rather aimlessly crouched beside her, and tried snatch a modest share of the forbidden book's splendours over h companion's shoulder.

It was all about a handsome young Don Alvarez, who, returnii from a party late at night, is seized by masked ruffians, gagged ar blindfolded, and dragged into a luxurious, mysterious, brilliant lighted apartment, where from behind red satin curtains proceec ravishing strains of sweet music from cymbals and flutes.

And when he at last dares to draw aside the curtain, what do(he see? A coffin, from the pall of which a skull, with two crosse skeleton legs, grins at him in scorn. Blood-red flames and incens rise to the ceiling, and a sepulchral voice speaks in the clouds.

"That is the coffin in which you will lie, in the same hour tha you betray, by one word or look, what your eyes have seen, and you ears heard."

So the shuddering young soul was to keep what he had seen an(heard a secret, till the end of time.

Hertha heard a bark, and as if waking out of a dream, saw Leo' figure, standing its full height, close beside her. The pug, who ha(evidently shown him the way, was at his heels.

The book fell from her hand. Don Alvarez sank into the nigh of oblivion from which he had sprung.

"What are you doing here, you burglars?" asked Leo in a laughing tone.

He was answered by silence.

"And how did you get in? Come, confess, Elly. The door wa locked. How did you get in?"

Hertha felt an internal swooning; but defiance choked in he throat.

"You needn't rate Elly like that," she said, getting up; "a the door was locked, we naturally got through the window. There is nothing to be surprised at in that."

"Indeed?" he said. "Nothing to be surprised at! And what brings you here?"

"That we don't intend to tell," Hertha answered; "it is our concern alone."

"Now, we shall see about that," he said. "I am not going to argue with you, my dear Hertha; you are beyond discipline. But you, Elly, come here a minute."

And Elly, who had quite lost her presence of mind, regardless of a sign that Hertha made to her, divulged in stupid fear everything she should have kept to herself.

"A letter?" he inquired. "A letter from Uncle Kutowski to you?"

"Yes," she answered, crying.

He simply put his hand in his pocket and produced the letter. "Is that it?" he asked.

Elly supposed, with sobs, that it must be it.

But as he looked as if he were going to wrench open the envelope, Hertha considered it her duty to interfere.

"You surely will not be so unchivalrous," she said, "as to pry into other people's secrets."

"I shall certainly be so unchivalrous," he responded, and tore the envelope open.

"For shame," said Hertha, and turned away.

But he read aloud, "'The Smiling Stars,' serenade composed for and dedicated to Fraülein Elly von Sellenthin, as a token of his esteem and regard, by Kurt Brenckenberg. *Cand. phil.*"

Whereupon he gave a little whistle and slowly ripped the beautiful verses into tiny fragments, which he scattered at his weeping sister's feet.

"Let that be a lesson to you," he said, knitting his thick brows, "and if I find out anything of the sort has happened again it will be a bad look-out for you."

"We may go now, I hope?" asked Hertha, as she scanned him sideways from under downcast lids.

"Yes, you may go," he replied. "There's only one thing more to say: for the future there will be no more underhand dealings here. Do you understand?"

Hertha shrugged her shoulders and turned to go. She had done with this rude man, for ever.

Elly, who was again leading the pug by the blue ribbon, followed in sobs.

When Leo was alone he laughed out loud.

"What depths of innocence!" he said to himself, and thought of the women-folk he had met and dropped abroad, who were now separated from him by the ocean. And then he thought of another, whose life was not divided from his by the sea, but who must be considered as dropped none the less.

He then turned to sample the books in which he had found the two young girls so absorbed.

Besides the above-mentioned "Adventures of Isabella," the famous library contained "The History of Great Courtizans," from the French of Henry de Kock; "The Secrets of Madame du Barry," in yellow paper covers at sixpence; "Practical Introduction to the Gastronomic Art for Gourmets;" "Guide through Nocturnal Berlin; or, How Bachelors Amuse Themselves;" "Sunday Magazine for Christian Families," year 1841; "The Future of the Threshing Machine in German Agriculture;" "Pious Helen;" "A Miser's Picture Book;" "Short and Simple Introduction to Steam Threshing," in German doggerel; "Report of the Construction of a Railway from Florchingen to Kirchheim;" "Guide to the Waxworks;" "Yearly Report of the Sisterhood at Kaiserswerth, with a Supplementary Catalogue;" "The Molock; or, Dangers of Horse-racing." The last item was a mantrap in the form of a book, labelled "Dr. Qualm's Collected Works." Inside was nothing but a forgotten cigar.

Leo contemplated the pile of yellow ragged literature, and shook his head.

"Such is about the average standard of culture of us all," he thought to himself.

Then his uncle's library was pitched into the stove, with the exception of "Dr. Qualm's Collected Works," which was to be filled afresh and handed over to Christian to be carefully studied.

IX

THE student of philosophy, Kurt Brenckenberg, strolled between the borders of the parsonage garden at Wengern and enjoyed the early freshness of the sunny sabbath morning. He had slept late, shaved, curled his moustache, and felt his mind full of sublime idealism and his heart full of longing for a fair mistress. He also congratulated himself on the heroic fortitude with which he had thrown off the effects of the last night's carousal.

He smoked his cigar in a self-satisfied humour, waiting till his sister should have finished ironing his shirt-collar, which she seemed to have taken an endless time over.

"I shall be obliged to make a row about it," he said to himself. Service in the parental establishment left much to be desired. When the things came from the wash they were not fit to be seen. There was not a trace in them of the stiffness and glaze which are the artistic triumphs of the professional laundress. He who knew what was due to himself as a corps-student felt it his duty not to neglect his personal appearance, but to keep up the dignity of his "badges" daily and hourly in face of the country bumpkins.

The eldest of nine olive branches, which had sprung from the nuptials of old Pastor Brenckenberg, he had gone to the University in his nineteenth year, it was vaguely reported, to study the dead and Oriental tongues. Nothing more definite was ever gleaned about the calling he had chosen, for he did not consider it seemly to discuss such trivialities. He left that sort of thing to the "swats," as he himself put it. It was quite undeniably certain, however, that he had fought fourteen duels, and had been "gashed" nine times; that he had been concerned in two scandals and a *praemisses praemittendis* intrigue; and that he had cultivated the drinking of beer to a fine art. Neither could it be disputed that he had been captain of two *élite* student clubs, *i.e.* the Westphalians and the Normans. He boasted, therefore, the title after his name, Guestphaliæ (XX), Normanneaque (X), and thus he figured on the bills of exchange and promissory notes which his father received periodically, accompanied by a polite request for payment, till that worthy declared it must now stop, and

that the young lardy-da would not get a brass farthing more out of him. He had remained firm, and his mother's tears and intercession for her darling had been in vain.

One fine day at the beginning of February, in consequence of the paternal hardness of heart, the son and heir arrived at the parsonage and announced his intention of staying there for the present. In the admiring eyes of his mother he blazed out as the possessor of a light, braided suit, the coat of which was very narrow, and the trousers very wide; of ribbons and badges denoting the colours of his corps; an ivory scarf pin in the shape of the corps monogram; a gold bangle with a sham thaler representing St. George and the dragon—also bearing the corps monogram attached to it; a swagger walking-stick, on the knob of which the monogram was engraved; a note-book full of the eternal monogram, and a purse which contained no silver except the monogram on the clasp.

For the rest, his trunk had little else in it save a book of students' drinking-songs, bound in calf, a few bills of exchange, a broken meerschaum cigar-holder, and a whole pile of dirty, ragged linen, marked above his name with the monogram in shot floss silk.

His mother, a worthy, hard-working and uneducated woman, was not a little perplexed at the constantly recurring hieroglyphic, but she was far too infatuated with her darling to think anything that he did ridiculous.

While he was thus displaying his splendours to the open-mouthed brothers and sisters, his father came in.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"It is impossible to go on studying without money," was the prompt reply.

"Come to my study."

The doting mother foresaw a scene. She hung on her husband's arm and stroked it coaxingly; but he shook her off with a rough exclamation.

A few minutes later two resounding boxes on the ear were heard coming from the study, and the outraged remonstrance of a virtuous youth. "Father, I am a corps-student!"

Almost at the same moment he flew back into the family sitting-room and declared that he must go away again instantly. He had no home now, and his mother must pack his things.

The packing was quickly accomplished; but when evening came, Kurt Brenckenberg had not gone. The next morning, too, he appeared at the breakfast table. He did not vouchsafe his father a glance, and once more announced his determination to leave by the first train, as he had no home. So it went on for several days, and his father, who might be repenting his violence, let him alone.

When a week had passed, he caught his son by the button-hole, and said—

"As you intend to go away to-morrow we will have a farewell drink together to-day. Put on your cap and come along."

Kurt acquiesced, and two hours after midnight he played the part of the good Samaritan by bringing home his father, whose drunken state, within a circuit of six miles, no creature would have taken pity on. He made up a bed for him on the sofa, so that his spouse should not be disturbed in her slumbers. After this no more was said about his going away.

The relations between father and son became day by day more intimate. Since his own offspring had beaten him at beer drinking, he had made no further attempt to assert his paternal authority, and allowed his son to come and go about the house at any hours he pleased. Only he could not give him money, for the noble youth's escapades had cleared him out of a year's income in advance. As he himself put it, there was scarcely a halfpenny left for the communion collection.

Through the winter Kurt Brenckenberg had lorded it, partly on the neighbouring estates, partly in his father's house, where he was dissatisfied with everything, and perpetually bullied and grumbled at his brothers and sisters. He drank, composed songs, made himself agreeable or arrogant according to the sex of his associates, borrowed where it was possible to borrow, and cut as elegant an appearance as was permitted by the increasing shabbiness of the last check suit supplied by Kessel and Münchmann of Unter-den-Linden, on credit to corps students. He got up private theatricals, contrived new figures for the cotillion, gave fencing lessons, and had understood on the whole how to make himself indispensable. Ladies gushed about him, but men rather avoided him, because if they so much as looked at him sideways, they were apt to be confronted with the disconcerting question, snapped out in tone of intimidation: "Will you give satisfaction?" Not that the sturdy young squires of the Hinterwald district were by any means cowards. On the contrary, they had proved often enough that they were ready where their honour was concerned to engage in any daring combat. It was only in the case of this little bristling fighting-cock, whom they regarded scarcely as their equal by half, that they felt stiff and embarrassed. Often as he boasted of his little adventures with pistols, he never gave a practical demonstration of anything of the sort. He it was who for the most part at the conclusion of the challenge formalities proved himself a model of wise moderation. But even this fact resulted in the increase of his reputation in the country-round, and made his pose as an irreconcilable combatant the more effective.

For his part he felt it incumbent on him to continue the *rôle* of

the celebrated Dr. Oswald Stein, who two generations earlier had turned the heads of all the rustic young Pomeranian rustics, and he made no secret that the ideal on which he modelled himself was the hero of "Problematical Natures." Accordingly he had entered on a sentimental love episode with the pretty daughter of Halewitz, and by the spring hoped at last to have found his Melitta. For it was at about this time that Ulrich von Klètzingk summoned him to Uhlenfelde to act as private tutor to his little stepson. The boy was delicate, and not to be overworked. So he had all the more leisure at his disposal in which to pay court to the beautiful fair-haired mistress of the castle. It was patent that she was a flirt. How otherwise would she have kept dangling about her all the cavaliers, young and old, of the neighbourhood? She also had some sense. For she did what she pleased, quite unconcerned by the gossip of friendly neighbours. And the famous duel had proved that she was in possession of an interesting past.

Nevertheless she had turned a deaf ear to his addresses. He had hardly dared hope for anything but indifference. He languished at her feet, despairing, full of worship and a desire to die for her; as the pages of olden times had loved their queens, so he revelled in this hopeless passion.

It seemed sometimes almost as if his homage rather pleased her, as if she saw the necessity, as he did, for a little harmless romance with the tutor. No check was put on his poetical effusions; his sighs and half-intelligible speeches. He might, if he liked, break his neck in knightly service, or, above all, attempt great things in verse. He scattered his leaflets about the house and garden; sometimes he placed them under her knitting or in an uncut book. Yes, he had even had the temerity to put them under her pillow.

And in smiling silence she had ignored everything. Yet his unrequited passion had not in the least altered his manner of life. He ate enough for three, and drank enough for a dozen. He consorted with the bailiffs, in the hopes that they might lend him money, and, after dark, he flirted with the dairymaids and farm-wenches in the stables, or under the elder-bushes by the water.

But this brilliant career, so rich in every sort of experience and sentiment, was doomed and drawing to its close. His first hint that it was so had been three days ago, when Baron von Kletzingk had informed him, that for the present his services must be dispensed with, his wife having emphatically expressed a wish to teach the boy herself for the next few weeks. This decision alone might not have counted for much, for Frau Felicitas changed her mind as often as a new idea came into her curly head; but what upset him most was an unpleasant change in her manner towards him which he had remarked several days previously.

She had become cold, almost severe, and when he had resorted to the usual method of letting her know his feelings, she had, after morning coffee, put a question to him, with a languid smile and yawn.

"How did these atrocious verses get into my basket of keys, Herr Kandidat?"

This was rough on him, and really looked as if he were out of favour. Nevertheless he was not the man to let a woman's foibles break his heart, and in the Prussian Crown at Münsterberg, only the night before, he had again thoroughly enjoyed a booze in his father's company. This morning the sun laughed down on a world in which there was plenty and to spare of women's love. If only he could have had his clean collar, his satisfaction would have been complete.

He resolved to agitate for this end, and went into the half-dark front kitchen where Lotty, his eldest sister, a lean, unattractive, blonde, sulky and faithful as a beast of burden, was ironing the Sunday clean linen on a large board.

"Am I at last to get a decent rag to put round my neck?" he shouted at her.

Dumbly she handed him a collar.

"Do you call *that* a collar?" he cried, twirling the limp strip round his fingers. "Do you call that piece of dish-clout a collar, I say?"

"If your linen isn't starched to your liking, get it up yourself," the sister answered snappishly, and put the bellows in the fire under the iron-rest till smoke and cinders flew about the room.

"It's a disgrace," Kurt said, "that a man should be compelled to interfere in such sordid household matters."

"Why don't you earn money enough to keep a laundress of your own?" asked his sister.

Instead of an answer, he threw the collar at her head, and she screamed out for help to her mother.

She appeared on the scene in a white dressing-jacket, and her grizzled hair caught up with a celluloid comb. Three of the small fry trotted after her. She was already worried and irritable.

"Can't you be quiet?" she stormed. "Father is busy with his sermon, and you are behaving like heathens."

"Heathens," replied Kurt, "are at least in the happy position of not requiring clean linen, as they prefer to go naked."

"Yes, you ungodly lout," cried his mother, whose admiration for him had long ago ebbed. "You are a precious, good-for-nothing——"

"You are a lout. A lout you are," he trolled forth, mimicking her. "A lout. Ha, ha!"

The harassed mother began to cry for vexation, and the little

ones following her example, the Sunday morning concert of praise was in full swing.

Meanwhile, Pastor Brenckenberg, suffering from severe headache, sat brooding over a bulky book of sermons at the half-cleared breakfast-table in the parlour.

He was a corpulent man of over sixty, tall, with massive shoulders and a red, coarse neck. He wore his thin, much-greased hair parted in the middle and combed smoothly behind his ears, so that it framed his big, bloated face with locks like those with which Christ is depicted in sacred art. In spite of the hanging cheeks and moist, protruding, sensual lips, there was an expression of power and strength about his countenance which inspired a certain reverence and respect. Twenty-two years before, the old Squire Sellenthin had appointed him tutor and bear-leader to his wild, unmanageable son Leo, though he might be thought hardly suitable for the post, his drinking-bouts as a student having been the talk of the country-side. But the keen insight into character of the old man of the world had not been at fault in this instance. The new private tutor ruled with a rod of iron, and at the same time made himself invaluable as a perpetrator of dry jokes and an indefatigable boon companion.

And when Leo was ready for the gymnasium, a bright-eyed, plucky boy in his teens, thoroughly well trained and prepared, Herr von Sellenthin bestowed on the convivial clergyman the living of Wengern, of which he was the patron. On the strength of this the pastor at once made haste to renew an old attachment, the existence of which no one had had any suspicion, and with the love of his youth as his bride, and a bonus which his squire had given him, began to populate the empty old parsonage as speedily as possible.

Hypocrisy and unctuous piety were not in this man's line, and no one could deny that he was possessed of a certain vein of cynical good humour; but woe to the erring sheep who fell a victim to his righteous anger.

One of the stories told of him, as a warning to others, was that of the overgrown hobbledehoy, who had been in the act of taking himself off to America, and leaving the girl he had brought to shame behind him. When it had come to the pastor's ears, he had seized him by the throat and had so nearly throttled him, that the seducer, black in the face, had sunk on to his knees and implored him to let him go, promising to marry the girl on the spot, and to stay in the country and work honestly to support her and the child.

Yet, in spite of his iron rule amongst his flock, he himself had no scruples in indulging in his own weaknesses. The Sunday after, he would kneel in front of the whole congregation, wringing his hands, his face streaming with tears, and send up fervent supplications for

Divine forgiveness, for his own and his brother's sins. Sometimes, when it chanced that an up-to-date town clergyman, who was in the habit of entertaining his parishioners at home with sermons of a liberal tendency, interlarded with quotations from Goethe and Lessing, occupied the pulpit at Wengern in his stead, he would say that sort of thing was priestly clowning, and reminded him of "Abraham a Sancta Clara." The natives were not cultivated enough to appreciate it.

The old man had long been a thorn in the flesh of the churchwardens. Several times, at Church council meetings, the subject of his resignation had been broached, but owing to an official report to the effect that the standard of morality was higher in the parish of Wengern than anywhere else in the province, it was decided to leave him alone. The flock loved their shepherd because he reflected their own vices and weaknesses, and their own rough, though cute, mental fibre.

This morning Pastor Brenckenberg found it difficult to attune his thoughts to the Holy Scriptures. He had chosen the unexciting theme of harvest, taking for his text the verse from the second of Corinthians: "He that had gathered much had nothing over, and he that had gathered little had no lack."

A propos he had tried to hang together a few consolatory reflections on the consequences of the wet summer—the diseased potato crop, the rotten fruit, and to give voice to joyous thanksgiving that at last God had let the glorious sun shine on the harvest-fields. But this "drivel," as he expressed it, nauseated him. He was in a mood to thunder and bruise. He would like to have something to curse.

"Shall I give them 'Hell' again, freshly furbished up?" he asked himself. But he had dealt with this subject only a fortnight ago. "I must let their burns heal first, and then I can go for them once more." Also, the Last Judgment; the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in its modern application to Berlin and the Social Democrats; the baby-farming murder case; the diphtheria outbreak; one and all had been used in previous sermons.

He meditated and meditated; but the more he did so the worse his headache became, and the more irritably wiry his well-oiled hair.

"Next time the lad shall not tempt me," he said, and savagely pushed back the cup of coffee and milk which had grown cold.

The door opened, and Kurt, who had won his point and got a starched collar, came into the parlour, smiling amiably.

"Have you slept well, papa?" he asked carelessly.

The old man threatened him with his open hand. "I'll never do it any more on a Saturday night, you young dog," he roared at him.

"How am I to compose my sermon on Sunday with a splitting head?"

Kurt perceived that his father was not in a humour to be trifled with, and poured himself out some coffee from the big brown family jug in silence. The old man shut up the folio before him with a furious bang.

At that same moment a sombre female figure passed by the vine-embowered casement, a cloud of black gauze flapping behind her.

The Countess Prachwitz's low muffled alto sounded in the outer hall. The pastor pricked up his ears.

"Get out with you," he commanded his son, and stood all expectation awaiting the entrance of the visitor, with his brows drawn together in straight lines and wearing his most scowling bull-dog expression.

Kurt, subdued, with his coffee-cup in one hand and a buttered roll in the other, slipped out by a side door. He would have given something to catch a few crumbs of the conversation, for since his flirtation with little Elly his conscience with regard to Halewitz was anything but easy.

The pastor and Countess Johanna were closeted together for more than an hour. The organ strains began to come from the church, and already the stream of worshippers was thinning, but the two still continued to converse in low eager tones. The pastor's wife had knocked twice warningly, and had twice been sent away. At last, when the clock chimed half-past nine, they came out into the hall, the countess with compressed lips and traces of tears about her eyes, the pastor with the dark frown of the avenger upon his brows.

"You may depend on me, my lady," he said, as he stood looming within the doorway. "I will do what lies in my poor power to bring him to penitence."

She gave the Frau Pastorin her hand and patted the watered curls of the little ones, who stood round gaping up at her, then glided out without bestowing a look on Kurt.

"My gown; my bands!" cried the old man in a voice of thunder, when the door had closed behind her; and while his wife, who had been eagerly awaiting this command, rushed to invest him with the robes of his spiritual office, he murmured to himself with grim satisfaction, "Now I have got a subject. Aye, and what a subject! Old boy, congratulate yourself."

X

AT the same hour the Halewitz state-carriage drew up before the gateway of the farm at Wengern.

The party from the castle were coming to church to return thanks for the master's happy return.

The two young girls in their white muslins (grandmamma believed in simplicity of attire) walked in front, their arms round each other, and their faces grave. Leo followed with his mother leaning on his arm. He swung along, broad-shouldered and well-groomed, glorying in the full consciousness of having returned to a noble heritage. His white waistcoat gleamed like freshly fallen snow, and the seals which hung in festive array against the slender roundness of his figure made, as he walked, a slight jingle which was pleasing to his ear, and heightened his good-humour with himself and the world.

And what a Sunday morning it was! The fields that had been already cleared, glittered like gold-embroidered tapestry, and the meadows, where the grass was beginning to recover from the stroke of the scythe, were spangled with a thousand dewdrops. The village, wrapped in its sabbath calm, lay in the shade of its limes, still tinged with the lingering rosiness of dawn. Everywhere crooked sunbeams danced on the smooth roadway, and from the cottage chimneys curls of smoke rose gaily into the blue canopy, where they melted in shining wraiths, like the vapour from sacrificial altars. Sunflowers and hollyhocks bloomed in the villagers' gardens—the whole picture breathed forth a faint prescience of autumn, a promise of harvest and enjoyment of the fruits of the earth. The people who stood before their doors bared their heads, and the children, overcome with shy awe, crept away under the bean-stalks.

"Come along to church," he called to the men. "Those who are pious in the morning are welcome to a free beer-drinking in the afternoon."

He wanted every one to rejoice with him, and to be as thankful to the Almighty as he was. His mother felt a soft pressure on her arm. She was walking beside him in her black satin dress and silver embroidered lace shawl, full of a pride and joy too great for words.

Now she looked up at him and inquired gently, "What is it, my son?"

He bent down to her and kissed her through her veil on both cheeks.

Silently she choked back her tears. Almost at the same moment the two young girls in front yielded to the same impulse and gave each other a kiss, looking round afterwards as if it were a crime.

"See," Leo whispered in his mother's ear. "They imitate their elders."

"There is so much love in the world that doesn't know what to do to find an outlet," said she.

"Now, mummy," he laughed. "You speak as if you wore trousers."

"Why, dear boy?"

"Because that remark is almost too apt to come from any one in petticoats."

Grandmamma thought this an abominable insinuation, and passing on to speak of Hertha, she expressed her fear that the way in which he treated her was not the right one, that it had evidently damped her, and might alienate her from him altogether.

He was going to make some reply, but at that moment they came within the sacred boundary which surrounded the small unpretending village churchyard, where, under the shadow of the primeval limes, the Sellenthins for centuries had found their last resting-place. A row of ivy-covered mounds, each enclosed in its simple iron railings, ran along under the whitewashed church wall, only divided from it by a narrow gravel path. There was a soft rustling in the boughs of the limes, and the deep tones of the organ, subdued and indistinct, coming through the high round window, fell on Leo's ear.

Involuntarily he stood still and folded his hands.

His mother, who divined his feelings, withdrew her hand quietly from his arm, and fell back a few steps. The girls, who had hurried on, were now out of sight.

He felt his heart swell like a flood within him.

Since he was four years old he had trodden this path. Within the whitewashed fence, at the gate of which the village swains gathered, and where, as of old, the bread-woman with her basket of loaves, and the old soldier with the wooden-leg and forage-cap, crouched on the cobble-stones, he had been used to shake off the week-day dust and cobwebs that clogged his soul. The high spirits and troubles of the schoolboy; the youth's defiance, and war of the senses; the grown man's household cares and imperiousness; aye, and that wild sweet mysterious something which now was done with for ever,—all these had been left behind him as he entered the churchyard gates. The graves of his ancestors had ever sent a pure, soothing

thrill through his being, so that he had come into God's House as one absolved and purified. And yet the feeling of holy reverence which awoke in him now was not comparable with anything that had ever before appealed to his careless heart with exhortation and blessing. He asked himself, in astonishment, how he could all these years have borne so carelessly the terrible dead weight on his mind, without doing violence to the world or going mad. Only now, when the burden had dropped off, did he know what he had been dragging about with him, and a sense of unutterable blissful relief took possession of him at the thought that he might in future hold up his head as a free man.

He caught his mother's hand in his. She had been busying herself with removing weeds from the foot of the railings, but now came and stood beside him before the last grave in the row, the grave of Leo's father.

LEO EBERHARD VON SELLENTHIN.

"Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high."

Such was the inscription which, according to the desire of the deceased, was carved on the rugged marble tombstone. He had been a powerful man, irresistible when amiable, terrible in wrath. He had maintained a whole troop of mistresses, and had allowed two magnificent estates, Ellerthal and Rothwitz, to pass into a stranger's hands, to save, as he said, the honour of his house. Old Kletzingk, Ulrich's father, and Count Prachwitz, Johanna's husband, had been his cronies. It was current gossip amongst the country folk that in an hour of dissipation he had gambled away his young and blooming eldest daughter to the count, a daring steeple-chase rider, and a man given up to betting and horse-racing. Before he reached his seventieth year he had been laid in his grave, and his neglected wife, to whose share there had fallen from time to time only a few crumbs of love from the table of others, sighed and mourned for him still, and held his memory sacred.

Mother and son breathed a quiet prayer, and took stolen glances at each other the while. She would fain gather from his face whether he had forgiven his father for the sale of the land; he from hers whether she still cherished love and regret in her heart for the dead. And then they both smiled.

"I thank you so much," she said softly, caressing his arm. "I should still have loved him, even if he had left us naked to beg by the roadside."

"But why do you thank me?" he asked.

"Because I can read in your face that you no longer reproach him."

"Would it be fitting for me to reproach him," he answered, "when I began where he left off? But never mind, mummy, all is going to look up now. I have got such a nice motto of my own. It will help me a lot, even to contend with the devil himself! But I would rather keep it to myself, and not tell you what it is, for if you knew how much hangs on it, you would be sure to cry out and wring your hands. Five or even ten years hence we will talk of this again, and then I shall be able to tell you if it has answered."

They turned and walked to the vestry, where the two girls were waiting for them.

The squire's family enjoyed the privilege of entering the church by the vestry door. The first two rows of pews, which were cushioned and divided from the rest by a carved oak screen, were reserved for their use. The pastor must already have gone into the chancel, for the vestry was empty. Leo had wanted to greet him before service, and he was a little put out now that he had not first paid him a visit in his own house.

"Is Johanna there?" he asked Elly, who was peeping at the congregation through a crack in the door.

She started as if she had been caught committing a theft, for she had just at that moment seen the Herr Kandidat, who was by this time seated in the parsonage pew.

"What's the matter?" asked Leo.

Whereupon Hertha threw her arm round her waist protectingly, and gave him a hostile look.

"Allons," he said, smiling, and then set his face, for he knew that as he came into the church the gaze of all his tenants would be fastened upon him.

The first thing he saw was Johanna's dark eyes with a peculiar light in them. She fixed them on him unflinchingly. He gave her a careless, indifferent nod, but took care that the girls as well as his mother should fill the places in the pew between him and his eldest sister. He had no wish to be disturbed in his worship by the near proximity of the gloomy, inscrutable face.

The pastor had mounted the pulpit and thrown himself on his knees, with his head resting against the edge of the pulpit cushion. His face remained buried in his arms, and only the well-oiled dome of his skull flashed down on the congregation. Leo gave him a scrutinizing upward glance, and murmured to himself, with a sly smile, "He's feeling sick, I'll bet."

Just above the worthy man's crown a wisp of hair stood on end, and, like a reed in the wind, flopped hither and thither. Leo's father used to gauge the sabbatical alcoholic condition of the stout minister

by this unmistakable sign. The knowledge had early descended from father to son, and when his old tutor was in a good humour Leo had many a time teased him about it.

"Wonder how he'll come through the ordeal," thought he. For of course the old fellow would have to refer to the home-coming of his high-born patron and send up a prayer of thanksgiving to Heaven. He leaned back comfortably in his seat, twirled his thumbs, and felt prepared to sit through cheerfully the service of praise which seemed especially ordained to glorify himself. The sunbeams danced everywhere, casting little shafts of red, green, and yellow light on the steps of the altar, the desks of the choir, and the tiles of the floor, illuminating the grey faces of the old, and making the bright colouring of the young more radiant. They climbed up the leaden organ-pipes and sat laughing on the brown-paper hymn-books. The branches of the limes swayed gently against the stained-glass windows, as if they too wished to greet the returned squire; and when the leaves swept the window-panes there was a rustling and murmuring, like children whispering to each other before falling asleep. A peaceful dreamy atmosphere of home reigned in the quiet little church.

Pastor Brenckenberg lifted his head. From his bloated countenance his eyes, full of gloom and bull-dog obstinacy, surveyed the congregation. They passed from one to the other as if they would have liked to devour one after the other. When they reached Leo they remained riveted.

"What have you taken into your old pate to-day?" the latter said to himself, and acknowledged the tyrant with a friendly wink; but it was not returned with any sign of recognition.

The prayers came to an end. The epistle followed uneventfully. But in the big man's voice there was a growling undertone which reminded Leo of his worst boyish scrapes in the days when that great red puffy hand wielded the birch over him.

"Beloved in the Lord," the pastor began his discourse, making his ten finger-tips meet as he spoke, "last night I had a curious and terrifying dream. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I dare say," thought Leo. "Why drink so much beer on Saturday night, old boy?"

"I dreamt that I was Nathan, that prophet of the Old Testament who walked the earth in the days of the godly King David, and to whom it was granted to see the greatest glory of the people of Israel. Well, I was this prophet." He made a pause, and blew his nose. When he had straightened himself again, his eyes rolled so threateningly in their red sockets that Elly, who sat next to Leo, involuntarily edged nearer him. "There appeared to me the Lord, the Lord of Sabaoth, at the mention of whose very name we all shudder.

He it was, and no other. His beard was of flames, His eyes were burning suns, a mantle of fire hung from his shoulders and nearly covered the whole horizon with its folds. I fell on my knees and trembled. Have any of you ever seen me tremble? Not one of you . . . but, beloved brethren, at the sight of the Lord I trembled, for that was no small thing. One of you arch-sinners in Wengern, who idle all day under the hay-ricks and play the fool all night in the taverns, would simply be blown to the four winds of heaven if the Lord deigned to reveal Himself to any such beggarly hound."

"A good beginning," thought Leo, who knew this little joke of old; and he chuckled to himself, well-pleased; but the glances which the old man again cast on him seemed to promise him nothing pleasant.

"And the Lord spoke to me. His voice was like the roar of the sea when a storm is raging. He spake, 'Nathan, get thee gone to David thy king and My servant. He has done evil in My sight, and his deed stinks before heaven!' 'What has he done, dear God?' I asked. 'What has he done? Shame on you, you short-sighted priest, if your eyes have not seen. He has seduced Uriah's wife, and Uriah the Hittite he hath suffered to be put to death at the hands of his captain, Joab, before the gates of Thebez, so that she should tarry with him and live as his wedded wife.' 'Verily, dear God,' said I, 'that is an ugly story. But Thou knowest how here on earth every deadly sin is permitted to the great—robbery, murder, adultery, bearing false witness, and other crimes; but the poor and humble, the peasants, and in particular the peasants' sons, may not commit the smallest sin—not even play with their tobacco-pouches in church'—of which those sitting on the back benches may make a note."

A solemn silence followed; only from the bottom of the church came a rustling sound like some one hurriedly putting things away.

Leo's smile died. He let his folded hands drop from the white waistcoat and fidgeted uneasily.

The old man went on: "'And what is more, dear God,' said I to the Lord, 'how easily I might come to lose my office of prophet and have to go begging in the streets, for the kings of this world do not like to be told the truth.' But the Lord spake, 'Fear not, what thou doest is done in My name.' Therewith He disappeared. But I girded up my loins and set forth to journey to the palace of the king. There I expected to find King David weeping in sackcloth and ashes, such as he has described in the beautiful psalm of repentance, which of course you all would know, if you did not prefer spending Sunday afternoon shooting at the bull's-eye, instead of staying at home piously reading your Bibles. . . . But what do you think met my eyes? The king was seated at meat in splendid

raiment, laughing and jocund, a bottle of sweet wine before him, and beside him on the right hand was his beloved Bathsheba—for that was the woman's name. He had grown stout, and he raised his glass to drink to me. Therewith he called out to me, 'Well, you priestling, what's brought you to me once more?' For like all the great ones of the earth, he delighted to mock at the servants of the Lord, although they can't do without them, if they want all their people to obey them, even such scum as have gone to sleep again to-day in this church. But I knew no fear, for the spirit of the Lord was within me. And I rent my garments and cried, 'Woe, woe, unto thee, my king, what hast thou done?'"

Leo could not be in doubt. While the pastor almost shrieked forth these last words till they echoed shrilly through the church, his small rolling eyes were fixed piercingly, and angrily, upon him.

What did it mean?

Was there another person in the world who knew? Could the secret have found its way from the grave where it lay buried, to pop out of this old man's brain?

"But I threw myself on the ground and tore my hair," he continued, with fresh zeal, and caught at his thin locks with both hands. "'Woe, woe,' I cried. 'Thou hast shamed and degraded thy kingly office, thou hast rebelled against the Lord's commands. A fire from Heaven shall consume thee. Thy memory shall be wiped from off the face of the earth which thou hast polluted with thy lusts.' Thus I cried, and a shudder shook the sinful body of the king."

At the same instant Leo felt a sensation of hot and cold water running down his neck.

"Too absurd," he thought, grasping the rough ledge of the pew. "Can an old sot like this give me qualms of conscience?"

"'What art thou raving about, stupid priest?' the king made reply. 'Do you think my conscience will suffer qualms through you?'"

Leo started. To the exact words the preacher seemed to have divined his thoughts.

"And he took hold of his bottle of wine to throw it at my head. But the majesty of the Lord fell on me, His poor servant, so that my aspect was terrible and filled him with fear. His pride fell away, and he stuttered forth, quite downcast, 'What shall I do to become once more the dear child of my dear Lord God?' 'It shall so come to pass,' said I, 'if thou repentest. Thou shalt moan and beat thy breast in sackcloth and ashes, because of thy fault, for it stinks before heaven. So speaketh the Lord thy God.'"

Leo looked down. The man above him was half prophet, half mountebank, but he was right. The deed stank before Heaven. No jesting could alter the fact.

"And the king grew angry, and called Bathsheba to him, who stood shaking in his presence. 'Get thee gone, thou temptress, for I am sick of thee. It was for thy sake that I went astray into the path of sin, and can no more be redeemed therefrom by Heavenly Grace. Thou canst marry another man, and no more come in my sight.' And Bathsheba, who was very beautiful, and from crown to heel a courtesan, began to weep and wail and cover her face. But I came between them and I said, 'Cast her not out, for she is the companion of thy sin. Thou shalt repent for her as thou repentest for thyself. Thou shalt not part from her, so that thy sin shall never be forgotten. Only in that way canst thou conciliate the Lord God who is eternally to be praised. Amen.'"

"When will this come to an end?" thought Leo, and cast a defiant glance of inquiry up at the pulpit to meet the pastor's eyes, which flamed like swords beneath his grizzled brows.

"Then a great longing came over the heart of the king. He sank on his knees and cried, 'Lord, Lord, hearken unto me in my wretchedness.' But the Lord heard him not, and His wrath was written on the heavens in letters of fire; and in a voice of thunder He cried down on the earth in His wrath, so that the mountains shook, and the water-floods dried up between their banks. And the king besought me, saying, 'Nathan, Nathan, help me pray to the Lord God of Sabaoth, so that He turneth His wrath away from me, and no more visiteth it on my head.' . . . Thereupon I sank on my knees, and prayed also. 'Lord, Lord, I have ever loved him; as a little lad, he crouched between my knees to hear Thy Holy Word, for the first time, from my lips. He was truthful and frank—and his laugh was like a peal of bells. Thy sunshine lay on his curls, so that he was the heart's idol of all who looked on him. Lord, Lord, star-light was in his eyes, and innocence in his white soul—— He promised to be a great light as Thy appointed ruler of the people, when Thou didst anoint him, as Thy representative on earth, with the sacred oil of the kingdom of Israel.'"

Leo stared down at the ground. He could no longer endure his old tutor's fiery glance. The red tiles of the floor flashed before his eyes like lakes of blood.

Not a sound broke the stillness in the crowded little church. The grim power of this biblical eloquence stirred and affected all, even the most simple-minded. On the dull, weather-beaten faces of the peasants and labourers there was a look of intense and painful excitement. It was as if every one felt that God, through the mouth of His minister, was in this hour passing judgment on a sinner.

But no! how could they feel this? Why, even in the souls of those sitting nearest to the judged man no suspicion had dawned as to whom the thunderbolts were being hurled at. Grandmamma

gazed up in uncomprehending calm at the foaming zealot; Hertha measured him, her head uplifted boldly, with disapproving eyes; Elly cast a gentle timid glance from time to time at the parsonage pew, whence Kurt Brenckenberg ogled her as much as the sacred place and the presence of the august preacher in the pulpit would permit.

Johanna had flung herself on the hassock, and kept her face hidden in her hands. She continued kneeling, or rather prostrating herself there, motionless, save for the convulsive tremour which now and again shook her tall frame, as if she were suppressing a secret sob.

The old pastor, also, had thrown himself on his knees. In fervid wrestling he flung up his hands towards Heaven, and tears streamed over his swollen face. In a voice half strangled by weeping he continued:—

"'Hast Thou not seen him on horseback. Lord, Lord, my God, riding in magnificence at the head of Thy troops, as he went forth to fight the Amalekites, the helmet on his head flashing with gold and jewels, the sword that he wielded for the greatness of Thy kingdom like lightning in his hand—— Thou hast heard him playing on the harp, sweetly singing to Thy praise and glory. Thou hast heard how he sang and played on harp and psalter, to bring home the Ark of the Covenant, to build Thee a house of splendour, of ivory wrought about with precious stones. Hast Thou forgotten the good he hath done unto his tribe and the people he hath reigned over? How wisely he filled the offices of state, and rejoiced before Thee, O Lord. For the sake of the love Thou bore for him, for the sake of the love he bears towards us, I, in the dust, beseeech Thee, O God, to pardon him. I will neither eat nor drink, and I will go bareheaded at midday, and will walk with my naked soles on red-hot bricks, till Thou hast bowed Thine ear to my petition, and renewed Thy covenant with David, Thy servant and my master.'"

He ceased, and wiped the tears which were rolling into his mouth. Here and there from the benches came a moan. One old woman whimpered, as if she were being pricked by spears. Sobbing was general throughout the congregation. Kurt Brenckenberg looked round on the display of emotion, smiling and shrugging his shoulders, then made eyes at Elly. Meanwhile, the moment had come for grandmamma to produce her smelling-bottle. Only five minutes afterwards she was fast asleep.

Leo sat cowering in his seat. He felt as if a heavy cold stone rested on his head, so that his neck involuntarily bent under the burden. His breast seemed to contract. He fumbled nervously with the white waistcoat which still gleamed as immaculately fresh as

in the early morning sunshine, but to his distorted vision there were now daubs of yellow dirt upon it. He felt as if he must defend himself, or, at any rate, speak to some human being. So he bent down to Elly and whispered, with a faint smile—

"The old fellow makes it warm for us with his curses."

Elly looked at him for a moment with big, vacant eyes, and then turned to her hymn-book again.

The pastor resumed his petition. His exhortations became more and more fervid, his voice more and more broken with tears, and the whole time his eyes never left Leo's face.

Even if it had not been so perfectly natural on this occasion for the dependent parson to refer in his discourse to the powerful Church patron and landowner, there could have been no manner of doubt for whom his sermon of vengeance and penitence was intended. But outwardly, at least, Leo was on his guard against betraying the horrid suspicion which long since had become a certainty in his heart.

The words of the peasant orator, like waves of flame, rolled over him, rising and falling with deadening regularity, till at last they filled and oppressed his brain. Yet he still fought with all his might to master the tormenting thoughts rising within him, to trample them down with brutal scorn. But it was in vain. The pictures of his vanished youth, which his whilom tutor skilfully interwove with his scriptural phantasies, were too forcibly driven home for his relaxed soul to resist them.

And then suddenly he started, as if a whip had lashed him. The word "Jonathan" descended from overhead, uttered in a tone that was alike caressing and threatening.

He knew why the old pastor leaned his bulky form far over the edge of the pulpit, as if he would have delighted to fly at the unrepentant sinner's throat, knew well why his fat fingers pointed at him, why the plump, bull throat twisted and craned in demoniacal contortions.

The zealot had now played his last trump, and would have liked to strengthen the effect with the power of his fists. But this he dared not do.

Jonathan! The mere mention of that name had been sufficient to conjure up before Leo's mental eye the vision of his friend in the *rôle* of an accusing angel. He gazed at him with his luminous eyes—he, the betrayed and deceived—and, between the thunder claps of the Brenckenberg lungs, his voice, sad and low, asked perpetually—

"Why hast thou done this thing?"

Then was heard a cry from a woman's mouth, a half-stifled gurgle of fear.

Johanna had fainted. Enveloped in her heavy, black veil, she lay, a motionless heap, on the red tiles in the shadow of the pew.

XI

THE drive home was silent and depressing, and so was the midday meal which followed.

Leo wrestled in his mind with conjectures and resolves. It seemed certain that some connection existed between Johanna and the old pastor's denunciatory sermon. To-day the mystery must be cleared up. It was an obligation that he owed his house.

As usual, the eldest sister did not appear at table. So, at dessert, he sent Hertha to ask if she would see him. Hertha brought back word that mamma did not feel quite equal to receiving him then, but in an hour's time she hoped that she might be well enough.

Without waiting till grace was said, he rose and strode into the garden, which lay gasping in the blazing noonday heat. The roses languished on their stems; the lazy, slime-covered carps sunned themselves on the surface of the pond. A draught of hot air came from the fallen pyramid, whose cracked gold letters, commemorating the heroic deeds of a Sellentine ancestor, caught the sun like panes of glass.

"*He* had to get himself out of many a tight corner," Leo thought, and resolved that he would let no furious priest bully him in future. The dull, oppressive weight in his head dispersed; once more his plucky, defiant humour bubbled up.

He looked at the clock. Half an hour—just time in which to smoke a cigar. He threw himself on a bench full in the baking sun, and let the blue clouds curl about him, enjoying the warm thrill which trickled along his limbs.

But still Johanna's image, blurred by tears, would not vanish. He had of old regarded her with a kind of proud respect, and had always esteemed it as a happy privilege when she had made him the confidant of her strange, introspective thoughts. And though he had delighted to hold up to ridicule the extravagant enthusiasm with which Ulrich, in his gymnasium days, had raved about the serious playmate, in his heart he too had thought her the most sublime of female creatures. And the day after the ceremony in the Temple of Friendship, when he and Ulrich had taken their vow to

be friends for life, they had secretly rowed Johanna over to the Island, that she, as a kind of priestess, might sanctify what to them was more sacred than anything else in the world.

He let these pictures of an intimate brother-and-sister affection pass before him, half-awake, half-dreaming, till three jangling strokes from the castle tower roused him into a sitting position.

Johanna's apartments were on the first floor, close to the desolate drawing-room suite. No one answered his knock, and he walked in. A big bare room met his eye. It was in semi-darkness, owing to the closed shutters, and polished tables and stiff chairs were apparently arranged at regular intervals along the walls, on which hung, as large as life, pictures of scriptural subjects and black-letter alphabets. An atmosphere of poverty and dirt, that abominable "poor-people's odour" so offensive to aristocratic nostrils, lingered in this room even on Sundays, and met him pungently as he entered it. This, then, was the widely known "ragged-school," which turned Halewitz day by day into a "kindergarten" institution for the poor. The room was empty; but through an opening in the folds of the partition he saw his sister in the next apartment, leaning, almost lying, back with closed eyes in an armchair. Quivering, bluish shafts of light zigzagged across the dusky floor. One of these fell on her sunken face, and brightly illumined the red-gold hair which she generally wore hidden under her black widow's veil.

He stood still and looked at her contemplatively. He studied the hollows on the haggard cheeks, the crow's-feet at the relaxed corners of the mouth, and that hard straight line running from chin to throat, the autumnal sign which no art can eradicate.

A shiver ran through him. What must her life have been since, as the young bride of a gay cavalier, she went out into the world, that she should have come back a faded wreck at little more than thirty years of age to bury herself alive in this living grave—a mere sister of charity, with no interest outside the wretched scrofulous children of the peasantry?

He pulled the *portière* aside. A curious scent of heliotrope and strong hartshorn was wafted towards him.

She had not heard his footstep till now, and slowly opened her tired eyes, which, directly she saw who it was, took on that fixed clairvoyant expression that had made them so terrible to him.

Some of his old youthful respect for her came back momentarily, so that he needed to give himself a slight reminder before he could resume his manner of easy defiance.

"I have come to talk seriously to you," he said, frowning, as he placed a chair not quite opposite her, so that the corner of the table was still between them.

She drew herself slowly erect, and pushed the leather cushion

against which her head had been resting lower to support her back.

"I have been expecting you, dear Leo," she said, "ever since that day we met again. You must have been saying to yourself all the time that it was not the same between us as it used to be, yet you have not come for an explanation. It is your own fault that you have had to carry about with you the consciousness of being estranged from your sister. But, all the same, you have managed to go your way laughing and whistling. That is the first thing I have to reproach you with."

He felt his heart harden under her words. Did she want to impress upon him the superiority of her mind over his own? And as a sign that he was not the man to be easily intimidated, he took his chair, twirled it three times on its castors, then seated himself straddle-legged upon it, and leaned his elbows on the back.

"You will permit me to make myself comfortable, I trust?" he said. "One's persuasive arguments are not so likely to be effective if one begins too ceremoniously."

A haughty lowering of her lids showed him that she was not inclined to tolerate his roughness without protest.

"Oh, please," she said, "don't put any restraint on yourself because of me. Why should you? You have accustomed the others to expect the manners of the bar at Halewitz."

"At Halewitz the manners which I approve shall not be criticised, dear Hannah," he replied; "and, if they seem too coarse for you, I advise you to withdraw to our aristocratic dower-house, where you will not be in the least troubled by them."

"Does that mean, Leo, that you will drive me and my step-daughter from under your roof?"

"It means, Hannah, that I will be master in my own house, and that I have no desire to let my temper be spoilt by the whims of parsons and women. For my good temper is very necessary to me, more so than you are."

She folded her hands. "What has come to you, Leo?" she cried, staring at him.

He laughed in her face. "Come to me? Nothing, except that I am now an ordinary healthy-minded fellow, who intends to do his work in life without being dictated to by any woman, sister, or any one else."

"You are well satisfied with yourself," she asked, "as you are?"

"Perfectly, so long as I am left unmolested."

"You positively are aware of no fault? Nothing that you would like to obliterate from your memory?"

"Ha! ha!" he exclaimed. "Now I know what you are driving at. Well, I am in the mood to let you preach. So fire away."

She cast her shadowed eyes in a heavenward direction.

"Oh, don't turn up the whites of your eyes over me," he added "I can assure you, I and the Almighty are on excellent terms."

His scoffing tone appeared to wound her deeply. She put her hands before her face, and leaned back in her chair, trembling.

His mother's advice occurred to him. He saw now that he ought to have made more allowance for the excitable condition of her nerves, and was vexed with himself for having been so rude.

"Hannah," he entreated, in a voice full of kindness, "be reasonable. Let us talk freely and openly, straight from the heart, as we used to do in old days. If we are frank with each other, things must be cleared up. A quarrel between you and me is a pure caprice. Come, Hannah, tell me, what is the grudge you bear against me?"

She let her hands fall from her face. Every drop of blood receded from her cheeks and brow. Then, as she raised both arms as if shielding herself from him, she cried, in a voice from which all the pent-up torment of a thousand sleepless nights seemed to break forth—

"Leo, she was your mistress!"

Now he needed his utmost strength to parry the attack. "I don't understand you, my dear," he said, shrugging his shoulders with affected coolness.

"Are you going to deny it, Leo?" she asked.

He looked hard at her, full of suspicion. Yet, after all, what could she know? A rumour from the gossip round neighbouring coffee-tables may have reached her ears, which had become a fixed idea in her pondering brain, and now seemed to her an actual fact. That must be it. It couldn't be otherwise. Yet he resolved, at all events, to sound her cautiously.

"Look here, my dear child," he said, "nothing is further from my thoughts than to pose to you as a saint. I am, and have been all my life, a full-blooded piece of goods. . . . But, I assure you . . . I haven't the slightest notion to which of my foolish affairs—all are over now—you are referring."

"I am not speaking of 'foolish affairs,' but of adultery," she answered.

"Indeed! Is it possible?" he inquired, still schooling himself to scorn. "That is almost worthy of the holy mouth of our old pastor Brenckenberg. And that leads me to a conclusion at which I have slowly arrived, that you have had a hand in the lamentations he poured out over me to-day."

"You have only just arrived at that conclusion?" she exclaimed.

"You know I am a little dense," he replied, with a laugh. But a cold sweat had broken out on his forehead.

She gazed at him, seeking to find a passport into his soul. "You want to spare her," she said, with a weary smile of contempt. "It is hardly necessary now. I let myself be deceived by her long enough. She knew well how to play the innocent with those eyes. Through her consummate acting she ruined you all . . . the perfidious woman."

She had clasped the arm of the chair with her thin hands, and sat erect as if preparing for a spring.

Leo hung greedily on her lips. "She understands the art of hating," he thought, and his heart beat loud.

And then, without further inquiry on his part, she told him how she had discovered the secret.

It was about two years ago, when Felicitas was already engaged, that she had found her one day in his study rummaging in his writing-table, the key of which was generally in Ulrich's keeping, and, when she saw that she was caught, she went down on her knees and had besought Johanna not to betray her; it was because she could no longer endure the thought of her fiancé sitting at the same writing-table which contained her letters that she had searched for them. Her letters, and to whom? So it had come to light.

"The fool!" Leo burst forth. "She might have known that her letters were burnt long ago."

His sister seemed to have awaited this incautious exclamation. "You confess, then?" she said, pleased.

He hesitated. "Confess! There is nothing to confess! A few scrawls belonging to the time of that boy-and-girl flirtation which went on under your eyes. Beyond that, I never had a line from her."

She looked at him again with her tired smile. "You are stubborn, dear friend," she said. "Your whilom mistress capitulated at once. She did me the doubtful honour of making me her confidante, but the *rôle* was not to my taste. The very next moment I showed her the door."

Leo saw at last that his secret, for good or ill, was in his sister's possession. To deny any more would be sheer madness.

"And instead of using your knowledge to help and to save," he said, grinding his teeth, "you must needs rush and confide it to the bosom of our old private chaplain, and through that crooked channel try to ruin your brother's honourable name and peace of mind, eh?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "He knew it long ago," she responded.

"How? From whom?"

"From Rhaden himself."

"The hound! the hound! He and I were sworn to secrecy. He has broken his vows to the dead."

"Do you deserve anything else?"

He leapt up. "Hannah!" he said, controlling himself with difficulty, "I should advise you to adopt another tone, or else I may forget that we are the same flesh and blood."

"Alas that we are!" she replied, folding her hands.

A voice cried within him, "Jeer at her, overwhelm her with your scorn and contempt!" but his victorious courage had forsaken him. He could only utter a hoarse, jarring laugh. Her eye rested on him, hard and pitiless, and he felt a narrowing of his heart as if iron hoops gradually encircled it. In his despair he bethought him of the covenant of friendship, in which Johanna had played the part of priestess.

"Is he not your friend as well as mine?" he asked. "Why did you not warn him? It was in your power to avert the evil. Why didn't you do it?"

A smile of self-torture hovered about her lips. "That is my concern. On that point I refuse to answer you," she said.

It dawned upon him faintly that here somewhere was the key that might solve the riddle presented by her distraught mind, but before he could put the thought into words it had eluded him.

"And what of our covenant?" he stammered—"our old covenant?"

"That was broken long ago," she answered, while in her bitterness a dark flush mounted to her cheek. "It was broken when you both put me aside to play with that white kitten. Neither of you troubled your heads about me then. And when I became engaged, no one asked me why I did it. Even *he* took no interest. And what I have suffered as wife of an adventurer . . . who knows or cares? Or how he bundled me about from racecourse to gambling-saloon, and from gambling-saloon to racecourse. Ah, what a life that was! But why do I talk of myself? I too only got what I deserved."

"What have you to reproach yourself with?" he asked.

She bit her lips and brooded. "Every one of us has something to repent, Leo," she said, after a pause; "I, as well as you. All day and all night I am repenting without ceasing. It is my right. No one can deprive me of it. It is the only way in which I can repair, in some measure, my ruined life."

"And yet you were able to endure that man?" he inquired.

"Wasn't I forced to?" she replied. "If I had left him we should all have been disgraced. When he died in a hospital, I could not be with him, for I was travelling about in order to redeem a cheque that he had forged."

"Johanne!"

Wrath at the conduct of the scoundrel who had wormed himself

into his family seized him so hotly that, for a moment, everything swam before him.

Tearless, with her tired smile, she looked up at him. "Till now no human soul has heard of it," she continued. "So you have no need to be ashamed of your sister."

He stretched out both his hands towards her. "Forgive me, Hannah. If only I had guessed! . . ."

"Leave me alone," she answered, pushing his hands aside. "We are not talking about myself. It is only better that you should know with whom you have to deal. And in case you should feel inclined to laugh at me again because I trust in Jesus, my Saviour"—a faint gleam shot from her eyes towards the crucifix—"I may as well tell you how I found Him. At the time that I was degraded and polluted by contact with that man; when I couldn't think, eat, or sleep for loathing, I sought a place where I could cry out my heart in peace. . . . I slunk about like an outcast, seeking and seeking, and could find no haven till one day I saw a church door standing open, and went in. There no one persecuted me; there I found home and husband; the Spouse who did not strike or outrage me, who Himself had suffered as I suffered; who smiled down at me from the cross when I clung to His poor bleeding feet. Will you blame me for having gone to Him again and again?"

He gave her a softened glance. Certainly he could never again mock at her pious exercises.

"But I was not then quite what you see me now," she went on. "I only realised to the full how utterly alone I was in the world when that person who now reigns at Uhlenfelde confessed all to me. After that I wrestled on my knees whole nights through. I prayed to God, saying, 'Lord, take me as a sacrifice; let me expiate the shame which he has brought on our heads who are nearest to him and love him. Do what Thou wilt with me in Thy anger, only take the reproach from him, and let him live honourably again.' . . . But my prayer was not heard. . . . Since then God has forsaken me as He has you."

She let the hands which had been raised imploringly to the crucifix drop in her lap, and she sank back exhausted.

No cynical smile stole over Leo's face now. His powerful neck bent, as if he willingly offered it to the scourge which was being wielded over it. There was a silence. Then he said in a low tone, "Hannah?"

She did not answer.

"Hannah," he said again, with a look in his straight, honest eyes that seemed secretly to beg mercy from her, "you speak to me as if I were a felon."

Still she was silent.

"Hannah," he urged her, "what am I to do? This unhappy thing cannot be undone."

There was a light in her half-closed eyes. "You are sorry, then, for what has happened?" she asked, raising herself erect again.

"My God! am I such a monster," he replied, scarcely audibly, "that I should take a special pleasure in the thought that I have slain a man for no other crime than defending the honour of his name?"

"Then you are ready to repent?" she asked, bending towards him with a sort of impetuous greed.

A shudder ran through his frame. "Repent nothing," came the old cry within him. Now that he knew what she was demanding of him, his manliness returned.

"What do you call repenting?" he asked, and thrust his hand in his pockets. "Shall I whimper and whine and tear my hair? Shall I crawl on my knees like a scurvy hound? No, dear Hannah. I must stick to my defiance, to my merry heart and thick skin, if I am to set things right. And now, out with it. What have I got exactly to repent? What more did I do than is done every day in the world out there? I am not a paragon. I could only act as I have seen others act."

"Then, from the point of view of comfort, your outlook on life leaves nothing to wish for?"

"Why should I rush headlong into discomfort?" he retorted, more intrepid than he really felt. "But to continue; you know my cousinship with her. I trust that you will not fling that up at me; and with regard to Rhaden, I was never on intimate terms with him. I knew him as a grumbling, cross-grained fellow, nothing more. So there can be no question of a breach of friendship. Later, when the affair got wind, and a challenge to fight was given me in the garden, everything was done correctly. He it was who desired that the seconds should not be initiated into the cause of the quarrel. His wife's reputation must be saved at any cost. I simply had to say 'Yes.' And this is how it is Ulrich rushed into matrimony in ignorance of what had really happened, and now I see the folly of it, and that is the mistake I so bitterly rue. Well, to proceed. The quarrel at cards had to be arranged as a blind, and just as little as he was to be blamed for not firing in the air, can I be blamed for shooting him down. For, you see, I was obliged to defend myself. I will admit that it all sounds very barbaric in black and white, but it is not my vocation to revolutionise morals —I leave that to the social democrats. I accepted my sentence and punishment, and with my period of exile in America I have done with the whole thing. So *basta!*"

He raised his fists as if relieved of some heavy weight. With this drastic explanation he hoped to break once for all the chain with which his sister had tried to bring his will into subjection to her own. But he could not evade that searching, hungry glance. He had learned to fear her, and felt that she meant him harm.

"If you will deliberately revel in evil thus," she said, "I must give you up as lost. But are you become so uncivilised and lawless that even the disgrace which your friend has suffered through you does not weigh on your conscience?"

"Be silent!" he shouted, jumping up. "You don't wish to be reproached on that score, neither will I be reproached. The misfortune has happened—any step that I might take now would only increase it. I have given up intercourse with him. Do you think that was easy? Do you think I can ever be quit of the fear of what may befall him?"

"And still you say that all is over, as if it had never been?"

"I say it is bound to be so."

"Yet the consequences of your deed cry to Heaven, dear Leo, on every side."

"How cry to Heaven?"

"If you don't know it, I must tell you: Your former mistress is again causing scandals without end. Your friend's repute is in bad hands. Who knows if all the world is not jeering and laughing at him."

"Johanna!" he cried, with a feeling as if his heart were being sundered in pieces within his breast. "Johanna, you lie!"

But she went on, calm and hard as nails. "God knows, I live a very retired life, but the gossip has even penetrated over my threshold. And if you don't believe me, you have only to make a few inquiries in the smoking-rooms of your friends and acquaintances. There, likely enough, stories are told; or go into Münsterberg, and see how our gilded youths exchange glances when Ulrich drives through the town in his yellow basket carriage. That is a signal for paying calls on the fair Felicitas, and she receives them all. Go to the post-office, and count the number of her male correspondents. You see, she has room in her heart for so many."

"Stop! Your hate verges on insanity," he said, and walked up and down the room.

She shrugged her shoulders. "If only you knew how far above hating I am! I don't even say that she deceives him. I know her, she is such a coward, such a coward! She'll promise every one what he wants, but she hasn't the courage to keep her word."

"And does it, all this go on without his knowledge?" he stammered forth.

"I wish that it did," she responded. "Then at least people

would, from fear of his horsewhip, have more caution. But she knows too well that she can trade on the loftiness of his nature, and so she plays her game quite openly under his very eyes."

With bent neck, and his breathing thick and laboured, he leant against the wall muttering inarticulate sounds. He could not grasp it. That he should be a dupe, an object of contempt . . . the noblest, the most refined of men! It was more than his thick honest head could take in. Then fury flamed up in him.

"I wish I had her here between my fingers," he bellowed. "I would wring her neck! I would wring her neck!"

With his hands grappling the air, his nostrils dilating, and his eyes red, he raged about the room. It was well for pretty Felicitas that at that moment she was safely hidden from his sight.

Johanna watched him with a sour smile. "It would serve her right," said she. "But what can you do? You are powerless before her."

"I? What do you take me for? Am I a cur? A slave of women? Her charm is for me completely broken, years ago. To-day I should confront her only as a judge."

Again she shrugged her shoulders, but this time compassionately. "You poor boy! She would only have to ask, 'Who has made me what I am?' and your occupation of the judgment-seat would come to an end."

He sank into a chair, the tears falling fast over his sunburnt cheeks, in which excitement had dug deep furrows. He sat motionless, crushed, and annihilated.

She drew nearer to him and wiped his forehead, from which the perspiration poured.

"Poor, poor boy!" she said; and then, close to his ear, "I think I understand what can be done."

A long silence ensued. He glowered at the ground, the corners of his mouth working. Then a desperate resolve fought its way slowly upwards within him. At last he murmured—

"I see nothing for it but to open his eyes."

"Good heavens!" she cried. "Do you think he would believe you? He would say that she had already told him herself."

He recalled the tone of gentle consideration in which his friend had spoken of his wife's bizarre moods. It would not be very difficult for a pure mind like Ulrich's to put the worst in a harmless light. And besides, how was he to summon up the courage to tell his friend what all the country-side was gossiping about? He, who himself in the past had afforded the gravest material for such gossip?

His sister, taking hold of his hands, went on, "No, Leo, that won't do. There is only one course to pursue. We two must keep

watch on her. Only thus can we, you as well as I, make amends for the wrong we have done him. For you are at present the only person of whom she is afraid, the only one who has any power over her. And you must use this power to bring her back into the right path. You understand what I mean?"

He understood only too well! What she demanded was the total destruction of all his vigorous plans. There was no doubt that if he became reconciled with his former mistress, she would be willing to receive him. But then the guilt which lay buried in silence must be dragged again into the light of day. If he crossed his friend's sacred threshold, the unholy secret must bear him company. Significant glances would be exchanged at the table, and guilty whispers echo from the listening walls. Would that be anything more or less than reviving the sin? How could he dare meet the questioning look of his friend if at the same time the eyes of the once-beloved rested tenderly upon him? And then there was the child. How could he ever bear to listen again to that innocent prattle? How could he endure to feel the pressure of the delicate little body as he came to be swung on to his knee, the sound of the dear childish voice as it called him by pet names? No! a thousand times no! He sprang to his feet.

She threw herself in his way. "You won't?" she cried, in an agony of anxiety.

But he, seeing further conversation was useless, turned to go. And she, apparently beside herself with mortification at the collapse (through his reawakened defiance) of her well-laid scheme at the moment when its success had seemed assured, caught him by the arm and tried to hold him back by force. Like a spirit of vengeance she clung to him.

As he looked down on her, he recoiled in horror from the mad glitter in her eye.

"Oh, you coward, you dishonourable coward!" she hissed. "I despise you! How I despise you!"

He shook her off and walked out of the room in silence, not the same man as he came in, of that he was fully aware. For he had barely succeeded in holding on to his highest resolution out of the wreck of his character as non-repentant. Behind him he heard his sister give a sharp cry as she fell swooning to the floor. But he did not turn round.

The next morning his mother begged of him the services of half a dozen workmen to move Johanna's goods and chattels to the dower-house. She had decided not to stay another night under their roof. He breathed a sigh of relief. Now he need not meet her any more.

XII

HIS cares as a landlord multiplied. It was true there was a prospect of the harvest being carried in good time, and the grain, which could be quickest turned into money, had succeeded splendidly, but after all, what were the few groschens that would come into the exchequer by this means? The work of undoing root and branch the mischief of previous mismanagement needed several thousands in hand.

Leo worked with all his might. From the first sound of the call-bell in the morning to the extinguishing of the last stable lantern at night, he was on his legs, and when all the windows of the house showed a dark front, he sat bowed over the old writing-table, where he calculated and reckoned till the papers became dim and the figures swam before his eyes.

But what good did it all do? Capital was lacking, and capital could not be manufactured. To begin with, Ulrich's gifts of love must be yielded as mortgages; as a man of honour, he owed this step to himself and his friend. And after that, any one who would make further loans would deserve to be incarcerated in an asylum. So, for weal or woe, things must jog along in the old way, till the first economies allowed of starting improvements or galvanizing dead investments into life. And at this time, when he went to bed and closed his eyes in sleep, he did not dream, as once he was wont to do, of the fine figure of a girl, a thoroughbred, or some bold escapade. Instead, there would hover before his eyes, as the goal of his yearning desires, a massive vaulted roof for the piggery, six new covered carts, a threshing-machine after the latest Zimmermann pattern, and an unending procession of similar objects which stretched their distorted shadows over the borders of dreamland. The pungent humour which it was a peculiarity in his temperament to exercise at his own expense never deserted him, and made it easy to put away from him the memory of even recent occurrences of an unpleasant description.

"Where should I be now without work?" he said, thinking of the interview with his sister. Ulrich's fate loomed largely in his soul, and he could not silence the impulse to help and save him.

He surprised himself sometimes, as he rode over the fields, with his pipe gone out in his mouth and his hand slackening on the reins, deaf and blind to all around, while his imagination painted the hour which would give him back again the companion of his youth in new and unalterably happy circumstances.

Oh, how he hated the woman and hated himself, when he was riding thus on his grey mare over fields of yellow stubble—in the blue distance the shining reed-fringed stream which in a few minutes might be crossed, but which, nevertheless, lay wider than the ocean between him and his friend!

Although he had vowed to himself that a future meeting was not to be thought of, he now and then hit on a pretext for ferrying across the river at Wengern, and by riding up the high-road to Münsterberg, clutched at the mere chance of it. Twice he had caught sight of him in the distance on horseback in his meadows. He still rode the roan which Leo had broken in for him six years ago; which, when the rider on its back swayed to one side, stood firm as a rock.

He drew up under one of the trees by the roadside, and watched him as he ambled away in the direction of Uhlenfelde. Once, too, he thought he had seen her. A lightly clad figure in an open landau had driven along the road. The servants wore the Uhlenfelde livery. Who else could it be but she?

This time he did not draw rein. He dug his spurs into his mare and galloped off at headlong speed. He thought with a shudder of the moment, which must inevitably come, when they could not avoid meeting. Should he greet her silently, or would he pass her with averted eyes? He did not know. That they would one day come face to face was certain, but he prayed that the day might be far off. The most likely place to meet in would have been Münsterberg, where he hardly ever went. He avoided the town, because he had made no formal calls on the neighbours since his return, and he was afraid of their cold looks.

Yet it was imperative that, with the harvest progressing, the right opportunity for selling should not be missed. So in the middle of August he paid the "Jew" a visit. "The Jew"—as the landowners called him for short—was an influential merchant, Jacobi by name, who was the medium by which the produce of the estates round Münsterberg was brought into the markets of the world. He gave and lent wherever credit was possible, and many a proud knight's inheritance belonged by rights to his pocket.

He never misused his power, and a single case in which he had played the shark was unknown. "To give is the best policy," he used to say, and, acting on this precept, he enjoyed unbounded confidence, and became richer year by year.

He was sitting at the oak desk in his counting-house in the same

corner, and looking the same, with his grey mutton-chop whiskers, and glasses on the flattened tip of his nose, as he had done five years ago when Leo had said good-bye to him.

"Ah, so it is you, Herr Baron," he said, getting up, and he took off his pince-nez. He addressed all nobly born landed proprietors with whom he did business as "Herr Baron," and all the bourgeoise as "Herr Lieutenant." An almost paternal smile flitted over his yellow, haggard, Hebrew countenance as he looked up at Leo with his red-rimmed eyes, which had a clever and penetrating twinkle in them.

"Have you had an enjoyable tour, Herr Baron?" he continued, and opened the little door in the partition, which was an invitation to Leo to enter his inner sanctum. "Now, please be seated, Herr Baron. I was half afraid that the Herr Baron was never to sit on this chair again. But the crops are good, Herr Baron. Good crops, and one could see certain signs of smartening up, which told of the Herr Baron being at home once more. Not sold the grain yet? Next week prices will rise, and the Herr Baron should let it wait till prices rise. For this year, I will make nothing out of the Herr Baron."

"You are a good fellow, Jacobi," said Leo, shaking the old Jew's hand. He was conscious that here was a person that knew better than himself how things stood with him. And then, taking heart, he asked—

"What do you think, Jacobi? Shall I be able to hold on?"

"If you don't mind my saying it, Herr Baron," replied the old man, "when a man is what the Herr Baron is, such a question is ridiculous. A man like the Herr Baron has only to say, 'I'll do this or that,' and he can compass what he likes. And in addition, when he has a friend like the Herr Baron of Uhlenfelde, who is the wealthiest man in the district, well, then, he can hold on to the day of judgment."

Leo felt the blood mount to his temples. It was taken for granted, then, by those who knew the circumstances, that he had been living on his friend. And the old Jew went on—

"Only five minutes ago, as the Herr Baron von Kletzingk drove by, I said to myself——"

Leo started up, and asked hastily in which direction he had driven.

"Towards the station," was the answer.

"Was he alone?"

The old man tried to look politely blank, as if he had not understood the real drift of the question, and replied that, so far as he could see, the Herr Baron had been alone.

Leo seized his cap, promised to come back, and rushed out.

The desire to overtake Ulrich, to hold his hand for a second in his, gained such sudden ascendency over him, that everything else receded into the background. The station was ten minutes' walk from the market-place. Already he could see Ulrich's yellow basket-carriage waiting at the foot of the stone steps. He could not evade him.

The Herr Baron had gone to the waiting-room, he was informed by Wilhelm, who reigned on the box, as worthy and dignified a coachman as thirty years ago. He found the waiting-room empty, except for the presence of a boy in the window-seat. Leo scarcely noticed him, for he recognised amongst the packages thrown on the table, Ulrich's old travelling gear, his plaid rug, tan hand-bag and hat-box. Beside them were articles strange to him. So he was going away? for a long time perhaps. He was all the more glad to think that he had caught him.

Should he go out and find him? No, it would be better to await him here, where there was no one to look on curiously at their meeting. No one but that small boy, who gazed up at him with the great brown eyes set in a pale, delicate little face.

The eyes struck him as familiar, and the gaunt thin cheeks, too, seemed to remind him of a face belonging to his past. There was some unpleasant memory associated with it, but what it was he was unable to guess for the moment.

He would have liked to ask the little fellow his name, then he recollected what had brought him there and how little the outer world concerned him. He flung himself in a sofa-corner and meditated, his eye fixed absently on the yellow bag which bore Ulrich's initials.

Then he heard a voice, a low, hesitating childish voice, say, "Uncle Leo."

He started. The voice sounded like one he knew. But already it had all dawned on him. A stream of ice seemed to flow from his heart and paralyse his limbs. He could not move.

And again he heard, "Uncle Leo."

There lay in the timid, trembling tone a gentle questioning reproach which children only use to their particular friends when they consider themselves neglected by them.

Now, worse luck, he was bound to look up. The boy had come out of his corner. With his right arm round the plaid rug, he stood by the table glancing up shyly at Leo with a half-pathetic, half-excited smile.

"Who are you, my little man?" he stammered. . . . He felt as if he had seen a ghost. Here were *her* eyes in Rhaden's peaky face.

"Why, I am Paul, of course," said the boy. "Don't you really know me any more, Uncle Leo?"

He forced himself into a joyous exclamation of surprise. There had always been a tie of affection between him and the poor little fellow. He could not hurt his feelings now without cause. His hands clasped together convulsively.

"Warn him not to touch them," something cried aloud within him. But the boy had caught hold of them already, and leaning against him, he began to chatter freely—

"I knew you at once, Uncle Leo. Directly you came in. But what a long beard you've got now. You had a beard before, but it was much shorter. Oh, it is such a dreadful long time since you went away. And I thought when you came back you would sure to bring me something, . . . because you always used to bring me presents. . . . The rocking-horse you gave me once I have got still. But it is too little for me now, and I have got a bigger one, yours is the foal. You should just see how pretty they look together."

Leo bit his lips, and nodded, smiling.

"How long have you been home, Uncle Leo?" the boy asked.

"About a month, Paulchen," he answered.

"And why haven't you been to see us?" he asked again. "When my other papa was alive you used to come every day."

"I have had no time, Paulchen."

"But you will come soon?"

"When I can, of course, Paulchen."

A proud smile now beamed on the boy's thin face, the short crooked brows of which had been working nervously up and down.

"But I shan't be at home when you come," he said, putting his hands in his pockets. "I am going to school."

Leo gasped. "To school? Where?"

"Ever so far away," answered the little fellow. "Wiesbaden is the name of the town. It is a very beautiful town, mamma says. And mamma has given me a lot of lovely new toys, and I am taking them all with me."

"And don't you feel frightened?" asked Leo.

"Mamma says, schoolboys are never frightened," answered Paul. "Boys must be brave. But poor mamma is dreadfully frightened herself. She cries and cries! Look here, won't you go to mamma, and tell her there is nothing to be frightened about?"

"I suppose you will be going at Michaelmas?" asked Leo, flabbergasted.

Paulchen laughed contemptuously. "No, indeed!" he said. 'We are starting now. Papa and I, by this very train. Papa is gone to look after the big luggage, and I am waiting here for him."

Leo sprang up. Then she must be at the station too! Any minute she might come in at that door. The hideousness of the

situation, which, in listening to the boy's pretty talk, he had almost forgotten, broke on him afresh.

He clutched at his cap. Like a thief, he must slink away by the side door.

"Are you going so soon, Uncle Leo?" the child asked anxiously.

"I must, Paulchen."

"And aren't you going to say good-bye to me?"

An irresistible impulse seized him. He caught up the boy in his arms with warmth, murmuring inarticulate words over him. He felt the childish lips pressing against his cheeks caressingly.

He trembled; and then the door opened, and not she whom he expected, but Ulrich came in. He let go of the boy, and seemed to himself as if he were a criminal discovered in an act of desecration. Yet when he saw Ulrich's look of dismay and reproach, he went to him quickly, and, taking his hand, said in a low voice—

"Don't be angry, and don't reproach me. It was pure chance. I did not even recognise him when I first came in and found him sitting here. I could not run away when he came and spoke to me. I have bid him good-bye, and in secret asked him to forgive me. There is nothing wrong in that?"

"No, nothing wrong," agreed Ulrich; "that is true."

Leo now noticed that he looked even a shade more wretched and worn than on that evening when he had paid him his farewell visit. His breath was short, his eyes burned in their blue hollows.

"You are not well, my dear old fellow?" Leo inquired. Had he not known by experience the tenacity of Ulrich's constitution, he would have had the gravest fears.

"I have been much worried." Then, looking at his step-son, he added questioningly, "You know?"

Leo nodded.

Ulrich stroked the small smooth head of the boy, whose closely cropped brown hair grew in two half-circles low on his thoughtful forehead.

"Have you said good-bye to Wilhelm?" he asked.

No; he had forgotten to do that.

Ulrich looked at the clock. There were still ten minutes before the train was due. "Run along, then," he said, "and when it's time I will fetch you."

The boy ran out, slightly dragging one leg, a habit of delicate children.

Ulrich looked after him with a smile full of sad, anxious tenderness. "It will be hard for me to part with him," he said; "he was about all I had."

"Must it be?" asked Leo, to whom the suddenly made plan, of

which there had been no hint a month ago, seemed not a little extraordinary.

Ulrich nodded, wrinkling his forehead. "Yes, it must," he said. "I should never have consented to it, of course, perhaps simply from selfish reasons, if I had had the right to decide over the child's future. But he is *hers*, and she wishes it."

"She is not here?" asked Leo, again betraying uneasiness.

"No," Ulrich answered; "with great difficulty, I persuaded her to stay at home. Just before we started she had an hysterical fit, and if she had had another on the platform it would have made a scene."

"But if she feels it so much, why does she send him away?"

A shadow of pained self-dissatisfaction, which Leo knew from childhood, passed over Ulrich's face. "I believe it is my fault," said he.

"Of course, everything is your fault," replied Leo. "If a stone falls on some one's head in Borneo, it is your fault."

Ulrich smiled.

"Look at the boy," he said, "and then at me, and you must see that if he were my own flesh and blood he could not be more like me. Sickly he has been from birth—sensitive, anæmic, just as I have been. And since he has become attached to me, he moulds himself more and more after my pattern. And nothing could be worse for him. Who knows what I should have grown to be without your pluck and muscularity to rely upon? He has had no such comrade as I had in you. Instead, he has only had me to pamper and pet him. Under my guidance he must grow up a weakling and a milksop, and no man. In order that he should have a stronger hand over him, I advised Felicitas to engage your pastor's son as his tutor. And when that young gentleman began to demoralise my household, I winked at it for the boy's sake. Finally, Felicitas herself got sick of him, and sent him packing. For two or three weeks after that she taught the little chap herself, but Felicitas is not the person to stick long to that sort of thing. And she was certainly right when she decided on a new move. I dare not take on my shoulders the responsibility of being the ruin of her son."

It all sounded rational enough, yet in spite of that it was monstrous.

"But if you must sacrifice him," exclaimed Leo, "why send him to the other end of the country? He might be ill and die before you got to him."

"Hold me answerable for as much as you like," answered Ulrich, and his eyes glistened with anxiety; "but just in this matter you must leave me out. The child is not my child, and I am bound to

acquiesce. All I can do is to see that the thing is properly done. Felicitas chose the school. The energy with which she set about it astonished me. She declares that such a thorough change of air may prove most blessedly beneficial to the boy, both mentally and physically, provided that the influence of his earlier surroundings are entirely eradicated. I should be quite ready to agree with her in theory, if the application of that theory did not tear my heart-strings. But why do I talk of myself? She is the mother by blood of the child. She must suffer more than I. Ah, and what will she not yet have to suffer."

Leo was silent. Suspicion, dim at first, that his coming home had something to do with what had happened, grew clearer and stronger in his mind. Was it fear that, now he was in the neighbourhood, some rumour of the horrible deed might poison the heart of the child, which had prompted the mother to send him away? The poor little creature's peace of mind and innocence might be blasted for ever by the tactless gossip of a servant or an overheard tag of conversation. For this she was parting with him, sending him into banishment, that the well of his pure childhood's days should remain undefiled. He had never suspected her of such powers of renunciation. It seemed almost too great a sacrifice to be wrung from a mother's heart. However frivolous she might be, this atoned for much.

The wonder was that Ulrich saw or suspected nothing of all this. Despite his being the practical philosopher *par excellence*, he always seemed to be more and more hopelessly out of touch with the practical side of life. But to open his eyes would have been cruel—cruel to himself more than to any one else. Why impose a fresh burden on their friendship, already bowed to the earth?

The bell announcing the incoming train sounded outside. Ulrich sprang up.

"Go out that way," he said, pointing to the door that led into the waiting-room, "so that you don't see him again."

"Yes, you are right. I promise that it shall be the last time," replied Leo. He squeezed his friend's hand and went, and behind him he heard a voice calling, "Uncle Leo."

XIII

HERTHA was not feeling happy. She had built such high hopes on Leo's return, that it was only natural that she should be disappointed. How she had thought about him, prayed and worked for him! and now she had to retire into the background. His teasing wounded her; his demand that she should obey him seemed almost an insult, and since her stepmother had migrated to the dower-house, Hertha thought seriously of leaving Halewitz altogether. She had written three letters already to her guardian, asking to be taken away, but had torn them up. Then, it would not be easy to separate herself from this spot of green earth, where the sun seemed to shine brighter and hearts to be kindlier than anywhere else in the world.

Nobody, not even grandmamma, suspected anything of these struggles going on in her heart; they came, and then were over as if they had never been. They were a luxury reserved for lonely musing hours; at rosy sunset, or by pale moonlight, in the glorious drowsy solitude of the forest and on dew-glittering meadow paths. They began of themselves, but ceased at the sound of a human voice. She derived from them a painful joy, a defiance that longed to be conquered and cling to some one, a thirst for battle which she only wished to end in a slowly bleeding, prostrate martyrdom.

The reaction was a wild whirl through house and courtyard. As before, she would romp and skip about to her heart's content, fraternizing with all the live stock, and as she no longer might superintend the milking, she slept, from pique, till the sun was high in the heavens.

Elly trotted obediently in her wake as she had always done. Only sometimes, when her friend's pranks were a little too much for her, did she strike and go to grandmamma with complaints, for which Hertha gave her a scolding, and she became her abject slave once more.

For the rest, grandmamma took care that the trees did not grow into the sky. Now that there was nothing more to do in the gardening or the housekeeping line, there was time for reading French in the morning, doing fancy-work, and practising drawing-room pieces on the piano. After that was over, one was free to go for walks, to bathe, or to loaf as much as one pleased.

It was a sultry, steamy evening at the beginning of September. The river lay softly gleaming like a mirror of molten silver. Blue-black clouds rose on the horizon, which now and then opened with a faint flash, unanswered by any echo of thunder. On the wooded rising ground above the river the glossy, fat red pony, half harnessed to his small governess-cart, was standing, flapping with tail and mane at the midges, which to-day seemed more impertinent in their onslaughts than usual. Occasionally he sent forth a pathetic neigh in the direction of the bank, where the white awning of a swimming-bath glimmered above the woolly heads of the bulrushes. From inside came those long-drawn shrieks, half frightened, half joyous, in which young women-folk indulge when disporting themselves in the water.

It was some time before the canvas-covered door opened and Hertha appeared, glowing-red, still steaming from the damp, warm air within. She jumped on to the landing-stage, that oscillated violently, while Elly, always rather pale, but still whiter after bathing, poked her delicate little nose out guardedly, waiting till Hertha should have left the dangerous plank. Not till then did she become fully visible.

Near the swimming-bath a light rowing-boat danced on the dark water. It could not have been used for a long time, and had been left neglected, to its own devices. The seats were missing, the rudder had been torn out, and at the bottom, between its thin ribs, a muddy whirlpool gurgled up at its every motion.

"What a pity the nice boat should not be used!" said Hertha, and sprang into it. The dirty water spurted up and sprinkled her face, but she did not mind that. Laughing, she tucked her skirts up above her knees; her shoes and stockings were still in her hand, and her legs, firm, round, and softly moulded like pilasters of Parian marble, stood out from the black background.

Then she squatted on the steerer's seat—the only one there was—put her footgear in safety, and seemed as if she were quite prepared to stay there.

Elly looked alarmed. "Oh dear! what are you going to do?" she cried, tripping about on the steps of the landing-stage. "Do come back and be good!" The exhortation "be good" she had retained from her childhood.

Hertha clasped her hands behind her head and stared into the distance, dumbly weaving fancies. Out into the current, circling with the eddies, swept ever onwards away to the wide ocean—into the blue immensity, that was what she longed for at this moment.

Then drawing herself erect, she asked, "I say, how does the boat come here?"

"Leo used to keep it years ago, lying on the sandbank, so

that he could get over by it quickly to Uhlenfelde and the Isle of Friendship," Elly informed her.

The Isle of Friendship! A double romance cast its halo about the little island, with its hazel-nut bushes, and high-arched coronet of alders and birches above, which, like the curly head of some drowned giant, reared itself from the water and looked fiercely across to the other side. A tiny morsel of white masonry gleamed through the sombre density of the foliage. That must be the temple of which the country-folk with superstitious awe whispered mysterious legends into each other's ears.

In ancient times the island had been the scene of heathen sacrifices. It was said that the terrible stone was still to be seen from which the Druid priest had spurted the blood of the slain victim towards heaven. And when on dark nights you passed the island, you saw, even now, figures swathed in long white robes crouching in the branches of the alders. In more modern times, the two friends had invoked the old spirit, and brought it back to life. And people related, besides, that on either side of the mossy sacrificial stone they had each opened a vein of the other, and drank the warm blood; that they had composed hymns to the white statue, and burnt incense before it, so that red fire was seen rising nightly into the sky. Hertha had heard all this from Elly's lips at school, and it had fired her imagination. The romances of her history-primers, the heroes of which had long ago been cast away as rubbish with her old exercise and composition books, lived again, a decade later, in her soul, glowing and glorious with mystery.

Before she knew Halewitz at all, she had pined to see the Isle of Friendship, and as, thanks to grandmamma's anxious vigilance, she had not been allowed to set foot on it yet, the very thought of it possessed a magic which filled her with the same sweet thrills which had been her delight in twilight hours at school.

She got up, and stretched out her arms longingly. If only she might get across!

At that instant her eye caught sight of an oar lying horizontally along the edge of the boat and wedged into it, but the twin oar was missing. An audacious plan began to take shape in her mind. She remembered to have seen an old key hanging up inside the bathing-house, which apparently belonged to the boat. She would make Elly fetch it.

Elly was horrified. "What *are* you going to do?"

Hertha banged with her fist on the side of the boat. When she commanded, she expected blind obedience. A few seconds later the little implement, covered with rust, was thrown into her lap.

A sudden furious ardour came over her. With the unfastened lock still in her hand, she tore the oar out of its old resting-place,

and dug it with all her strength deep in the morass, from which glittering bubbles came gurgling to the surface. Poor Elly's lamentations died away unheeded. The boat began slowly to break through the reeds and sedges, and to drift up the stream.

Hertha calculated that if she kept to the calm shallows near the bank and worked her way up to a point where she would have left the island a hundred paces behind her, she might hope by skilful steering and even with only one oar to master the current, and reach her goal by a circuitous route.

When she saw that she was really making progress, she uttered a cry of triumph, and worked on with yet hotter zeal.

Meanwhile Elly, like a motherless chicken, ran wildly up and down amongst the reeds and rushes on the bank, getting her shoes stuck in the slime, and falling over willow-stumps. She wrung her hands, and implored Hertha to come back, but for answer was laughed to scorn.

But Hertha's Nemesis soon overtook her. The boat that unintentionally she had launched into a whirling side-current began to turn round of itself. For a few moments it stayed motionless, as if not sure what to do next, then began to glide, at first slowly, and afterwards more and more rapidly towards the valley. It passed the bathing-house and the island, and descended gaily in mid-stream.

Elly saw how Hertha lost her grasp of the oar and threw it away, how she spread out her arms, and called out some words quite unintelligible, so that she did not know whether they meant triumph or despair. She went back to her cart, sat down on the grass beside the pony to await coming events, and wept.

Thus it happened that when supper was ready at Halewitz, neither of the girls put in an appearance. Leo tried to laugh away his mother's uneasiness, but at once ordered the mare to be resaddled, which stood sweating in the stable, put a flask of brandy in his pocket, whistled for his namesake, and started off two minutes later over the dewy meadows to the river.

The thunderstorm, which had been threatening all day, had dispersed. A crescent moon shone serenely in the blue and gold expanse of cloud. He could not deny that he was anxious about the girls. Two such giddy young creatures, it was true, might certainly lose themselves without being in any particular danger. But Hertha had the devil in her, and her escapades were generally serious. The dog, who had bounded on before him, discovered the pony cart with a howl of joy. He was about to give a sigh of relief, when he saw Elly was crouching on the ground alone, bathed in tears. The reins slid from his hand, and the mare and everything else seemed to spin round.

"Where is Hertha?" he burst forth.

His sister with a sob pointed to the stream.

He saw nothing but green and yellow sparks dancing before his eyes.

"Drowned?" he asked hoarsely.

She shook her head, but it was some time before he could get a clear account of what had happened.

"Why did you not instantly make for home and fetch help?" he demanded, his hand tightening on the bridle.

"You really mustn't shout at me like that, I am so awfully afraid of you," was her plaintive reply, accompanied by one of her practised glances from tear-filled eyes which would have melted a heart of stone.

He laughed, half annoyed, half mollified, and gave her orders to drive home at express speed and tell the bailiff to send a conveyance with servants and lanterns immediately to Newferry, the nearest village, three-quarters of a mile away in the valley.

She climbed obediently into the cart, and he lashed his horse and tore over stubble, marsh, and sedge into the dusk; his gaze fixed on the stream, which, glowing and vapouring as if covered with burning petrol, ran beside him on the other side of the reed-wall. Every sand-bank and every drifting plank stood out black and sharply defined from the fiery gold channel beneath. Yet night was drawing on apace. In another quarter of an hour even, it would be impossible to discern the little craft, driven on noiselessly through the shadows. And from the side of the reed-hedge a quarter of the stream's breadth was hidden from view already. He drew up, and called her name through the silence. There was no answer, except the barking of his hound, who had taken advantage of the pause to go off on a hunt for birds' nests and nocturnal vermin sneaking amongst the wheat and stubble.

He rested in his stirrups, and surveyed the landscape.

From this point the river could be seen for a quarter of a mile, but there was not a sign of a boat upon it, for during the summer droughts shipping was at a standstill, and what lighter craft might be about sought a haven at nightfall in the little landing-places of the inns, where the shrubs and woodwork protected them from the current.

He rode on.

The surface of the water became darker and darker, and his uneasiness increased. If she spent the night on the mist-enveloped stream, sitting in the little boat half-filled with water, she would probably catch her death.

The bank which, so far, had sloped down to the reeds in slight declivities, became lower here. A dyke made by human hands replaced the natural one of boscage.

Now the prospect was more open, but this availed nothing, for the face of the stream had become a monotonous dark blue. The moon had sunk, and only the reflection of a star here and there trembled, softly gleaming on the waters.

Once more his call rang out into the distance. Croaking frogs held their tongues, and that was the only result. Here the outlying houses of Newferry showed in black outline near the dyke. Two or three mongrels rushed out of the yards, and set up a furious yapping, which Leo the hound received in lofty silence, till they, growing more impertinent, ventured to touch him. Then he seized them one after the other by the back, and administered a sound shaking. There was a faint whine, and all was still again. In the houses every one seemed to have gone to bed. The inn itself lay dark and deserted. Nowhere did a boat cast its shadow on the bank.

Nevertheless, he stopped and called her name across to the house. He listened awhile, but no sound came except the renewed barking of the dogs.

There would be time enough on his way back to wake the people of the inn, if he had not found her before that. He resumed his gallop over the loamy ground of the dyke, the black line of which uncoiled itself like a serpent before him, and was lost in the bluish haze down-stream.

He passed more villages, two, three altogether, and met with the same luck everywhere.

A cloud of steam rose from his horse's haunches, its head was sticky from sweat, and great flecks of foam flew about from its snorting nostrils. The dog's breath came in short, panting gasps, as if he too apparently had begun to come to the end of his powers.

Leo calculated that he had ridden about two miles along the bank of the river. Further than this it would be impossible for her to have reached in the last four hours. Somewhere, then, within this compass she must yet be afloat, if she was not making her way home to Halewitz. He sent the dog into the reeds and began to ride back at a walking pace. The late-summer night slowly spread its white damp veil over the landscape. The crickets chirruped, and now and then there was a swish in the water, as a water-rat shot out from the shore into the mirror-like surface.

By the time he had reached Newferry again, he had given up the search, and resolved to raise the alarm among the inhabitants. The conveyance from Halewitz had not arrived, for the inn still lay in darkness and silence.

He got off his horse, tied the bridle to the sunk fence over which sunflowers poked their round faces, like night-capped women giving a sleepy and sulky greeting. He stretched his limbs with a groan, for they had become damp and stiff from riding through the mist.

He regarded the excitement of the last few hours almost in the light of a blessing, for it had taken his mind off the one eternal thought that had tormented it for weeks. Now, of a sudden, it came back and then was gone again, like an arrow whizzing past the ear as a reminder from a hidden enemy.

"When once I have found her," he thought, "I don't mind what I go through into the bargain."

He would never have thought it possible that the strange young creature, whose stony defiance and noisy, boisterous tricks had alternately annoyed and amused him, could have become so dear to his heart.

He walked with stiff legs in high riding-boots along the dark wooden palings to the front door, on the stone threshold of which the dog, stretched on all fours, was howling and scratching as if he wanted to bore his way inside like a mole. The low door yielded to a push. He stumbled down into a dark vestibule, but through the door beyond a fire flickered brightly on the open hearth, and, lifting his eyes, he beheld the lost girl standing before him illuminated by the flames.

She wore a short red gathered peasant's skirt, from beneath which her naked feet shone forth. She held a coarse woollen crossover with her thin brown arms tightly round her bosom. The short sleeves of a rough, yellowish linen chemise of the kind that peasants spin themselves showed under it. She stared aghast at the intruder, her face deadly pale. The dog sprang up on her with a yelp of pleasure, but she did not touch him.

"My dear, dear child," cried Leo, stretching his hands out to her in unfeigned gladness, "I have found you. Thank God—found you."

The blood came rushing back into her cheeks, and she cast down her eyes, but made no sign of taking the hands held out to her.

Then she said in a low voice, without lifting her eyes from the floor—

"Will you be so kind, Uncle Leo, as to tell the dog to be quiet. The woman here is ill, and her husband is gone to Münsterberg for the doctor."

A motion of his foot sent the dog into a corner.

"But how about you, my child?" he exclaimed, "you don't speak of yourself."

She had been quite prepared for a scolding, and was not sure in what tone she should answer this overwhelming friendliness. A wavering smile, alike defiant and pained, played about the corners of her mouth.

"Well, you see what I am doing," she said, evading his glance. "I am here brewing elder tea for the sick woman."

A kettle stood on the tripod near her on the hearth, licked by the ruddy flames.

"And what have you got on?" he asked.

She stepped quickly out of the circuit of light cast by the fire, and drew the shawl, with her left hand, closer round her throat.

"I had to put on just what I could find," she stammered, "so please don't look at me."

There hung drying above the fire on a clothes' line a wet skirt, which still steamed, and near it a draggled rag, which was the light cotton blouse she had been wearing that day.

"You were upset!" he exclaimed, hardly able to master his horror.

She tried to shrug her shoulders indifferently, but looked rather piteous as she did so.

"Upset?" she said; "well, what of that? I simply swam ashore."

"In those clothes?" he asked. "What woman could ever swim in clothes?"

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed, with her eyes still on the floor; "why not? The things I could do without I left in the boat. . . . To-morrow they will turn up somewhere."

"Now, child, tell me all about it," he urged.

"What am I to tell you?" she replied. "You will only scold me;" and her lips curled saucily.

"I promise I won't," he assured her.

"Then, here goes," she said, and fetched a deep breath as if to gain courage for the task. "When I found, all at once, that I had got into the current, and saw that with one wretched oar I couldn't get out again, I thought to myself, 'God's will be done. At any rate, you will enjoy the beautiful evening till some one comes to pick you up;' but no one came. But I didn't mind that either. It was really so wonderful to see reeds and banks rushing by. It was like being in the middle of fairyland."

She paused and looked up at him with great scared eyes, as if she suddenly recollected to whom she was speaking. Then she devoted herself to the kettle, raised the lid, and blew the flames.

"Why don't you go on?" he insisted on knowing.

"I can't," she said softly. "You *will* look at me all the time."

"I'll look the other way," he said.

Then she resigned herself to fate and continued—

"After it had lasted half an hour and more, it began to bore me. I had no place to rest my feet on, for the water splashed about at the bottom of the boat. When the houses of Newferry came in sight I thought to myself, now my troubles will end, and I called out and yelled at the top of my voice, but all in vain. The hole is called

Newferry, but not a sign of a ferry-boat was to be seen anywhere. Well, then I simplified matters by jumping into the water."

"Girlie, you must have been possessed by a demon," he cried, half angry, half laughing.

"So the people thought in the village,' she replied; "because when I bobbed up at the dyke they all ran away from me. It was a good thing that I happened to know the people at the inn. They used to rent our . . . that is to say . . . *the* public-house at Halewitz."

He mentioned the name that occurred to him.

Yes. Buttkus; that was it. And then she told him of the miserable plight she had found the house in. The woman lay in bed delirious from fever; the landlord in desperation had resorted to the brandy bottle.

"I sent the fellow off on the spot to Münsterberg to fetch the doctor," she concluded, "and I shall stay here till he comes back, whether you think that I ought or not."

And she gave him a challenging look as if she saw herself being carried out of the place by force.

But he at once soothed her. Nothing was farther from his thoughts than to disturb her in her noble work of charity.

"One question you must answer, however," he said.

"Well?"

"An hour ago you were here?"

"Certainly I was."

"Didn't you hear your name being called?"

She seemed embarrassed, reflected a little, and then said in a decisive tone—

"Yes."

"And why didn't you answer?"

There was silence.

She took the kettle off the tripod and poured the water, which was boiling, into a stewpan, from which rose the fragrant scent of elder flowers.

"You'll allow me at least to take the woman her tea?" she said. "The poor thing has such shivering fits."

And without waiting for his response she went out at the door, holding the handle of the hot stewpan deftly between two fingers.

Leo devoured with his eyes the slender virginal figure in its rough costume as it disappeared into the darkness.

He seated himself on an oak stump which, chopped up, was used for firewood, and let his fingers idly run along the teeth of the hatchet, turned into an instrument of gold by the flickering firelight.

The St. Bernard looked up at him with intelligent eyes.

"Like a fairy tale," she had said. And this was like being in a fairy tale, too. The walls were covered with rough household utensils.

The huge open chimney-place was all encrusted with glittering flakes of soot that struggled upwards in fantastic zigzag shapes, and when loosened from the velvet cloud of smoke, rained down on to the hearth in a shower of metallic scales. Above the fire of crackling logs, along which the blue flames greedily felt their way before plunging into their heart, the steaming flower-patterned blouse belonging to the careless child wreathed the hearth with a festive-looking garland. The quivering reflection of the flames shot up brilliantly and filled the room one moment, the next they sank, giving place to dark shadows, his own shadow most conspicuous, magnified to gigantic proportions on the wall and rising to the ceiling, with a black hatchet grasped in his hand . . . a grim sentinel.

Like this shadow, he thought, holding the hatchet and waiting a chance to bring it down, was that old sin. There was no path along which it did not follow him. Where he was, it was, too. In this hour it would not tolerate for a moment that he should forget it. He looked at the clock. Ten minutes past eleven; and still there was no sound of the carriage coming.

He rose and went out on tiptoe up to the dýke to look round. As he came to where his mare was standing, he saw with alarm that its smoking body was convulsed with cold shivers.

"Well to be born a landed proprietor," he reflected. "If I was my groom this negligence would cost me my situation and bread."

Hurriedly he went back and found in a corner of the kitchen a patchwork square such as the poor people use instead of carpet. In this he wrapped the shaking animal, after he had dried its legs and flanks with a towel.

Far and wide darkness and silence reigned. Only on the other side of the stream a torchlight came and went, and reappeared in another place. Probably nocturnal crab-catchers were abroad. The mist had thickened, and appeared to be heavy on the river. Bluish-white tags detached themselves now and then, and melted in the starry sky, or hung about the bushes and shrubs, whose blurred blackness rose out of a milky surface. He heard a soft trickling sound coming from the trees near. The dew was falling. He shivered in his damp clothes.

"God be praised that I have got her safe," he thought, and turned back to the house. As he stepped softly over the threshold, he fancied he heard Hertha speaking his name. He stood still in astonishment.

"Leo . . . my dear, dear, *dear* Leo!"

He had never heard any words in his life so fervid, so full of awed and hesitating tenderness.

But the problem was soon solved. She was sitting on the oak stump, bending down caressing the dog whose head rested between her feet, which were now shod in stockings and wooden shoes.

He was inwardly vexed, and laughed. But she, when she heard him coming, sprang up with a cry as if she had been doing something very wrong.

"I was so big a blockhead for a minute," he confessed, laughing, "as to think that was meant for me."

A fresh wave of colour swept her cheeks. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she said, "You are mistaken."

"Yes, I always am being mistaken," he answered; and turning to the dog, he added, "You are lucky, old boy. Your master is treated *en canaille*, but you who are *canaille* itself get caresses and endearments."

"Uncle Leo," she began, with flashing eyes, "I hope that you will be chivalrous enough, to-day at least, not to take advantage of my helpless position to scoff at me."

"But, my dear child, . . ." he said soothingly.

"Don't call me your dear child. I am not your dear child. . . . I am a stranger to you, as much as any one else. I am a lonely forsaken girl, whom you found receiving hospitality under your roof; you let her stay, because you cannot very well tell her to go. But simply because I am still your guest, I beg that you will not speak to me now, but go away. Leave me to my fate. I dare say that I can find my way home, though after that I am not quite certain what I shall do."

She stood leaning against the inglenook biting her lips, and stared at the fire, which cast a golden glow over her flowing hair and naked brown arms. He was quite unmanned by the loveliness of the picture.

He came close to her, and smiling into her amazed eyes, stroked her on the forehead and cheeks three times.

She gazed up at him motionless, with half-open mouth. She seemed scarcely to comprehend what was happening. For it was the first time any man had ever stroked her cheek.

"What's the matter, sweet one, dearest? What have I done to you?" he asked in a low voice, leaning over her. "Tell me why you rage so furiously against me."

She tried to speak, but her lips would not obey. She wanted to guard herself, but her arms sank to her sides.

"Listen," he continued, "I delight in you, every hour that I see you. Every day you grow dearer to me. You are the sunshine of the house, but you keep up your feud with me, just as if I were positively your arch-enemy, or God knows what monster."

She shut her eyes, and swayed as if she must lie down and fall asleep.

"And look here," he began again. "If I have teased you a little now and then, you must take it in good part. While I have been

away, all of you have just got into the habit of doing what you like. But I want to inculcate method and order; and you, too, my dear child, I would have fall in with my rules. And that won't be so difficult, for I shall require nothing very dreadful of you. Will you agree? Say yes, please. Do me the favour."

Whereupon she dropped down on the wooden stump, and covering her face with her hands, began to cry bitterly.

"What a quaint young thing it is," he thought. "Instead of throwing herself into my arms, which I, as a good uncle, deserve, she sits down and howls."

He placed himself beside her, and looked down on her head. Slowly, half uncertain, he raised his left hand. "May I?" he wondered, and let it glide gently over her damp hair, which shone, red as a fox, in the firelight.

Then she clung with both hands to his arm, and leaning her head against it, whispered, still sobbing—

"Why—why are you so horrid to me?"

"When have I been horrid? I have always meant to be good to you, child."

"Really! Will you really be good to me?"

"Of course, my child."

He stooped, and was going to kiss her on the forehead; but as at this moment she moved her head sideways, it happened that their lips rested on each other.

"How innocently she lets herself be kissed," he thought.

And then suddenly she jumped up, and tore out of the room as fast as her clattering pattens would permit.

He ran both hands through his hair, and strode like one possessed up and down the uneven tiles of the kitchen.

A childlike, foolish blissfulness filled his soul. He felt as if he was again fifteen years old, in jackets and with curly hair, coming home triumphant from his first rendezvous, when Felicitas had given him her first kiss.

Felicitas!

Like the stab of a knife the thought of her pursued him. But the next minute he laughed out loud, and raised his hands in proud confidence to the ceiling. The kiss of the innocent child had opened founts of youthful gladness within him.

If he dared hope one day to win this young heart for his own, then all would be made right again. Then the burden of guilt, borne for years, would fall of itself. Then what filled his life with vague uneasiness, and made him sometimes not know himself, would yield to peace and a happy state of mind. It would die away—die like that flickering, greedy, leaping flame, which now, at last, had sunk, and lay at rest in a dull red-hot glow. And when he turned round

he saw that the grand spectre which had cast its shadow, hatchet in hand on the wall, had gone too.

His mood became pleasantly dreamy. He rested his head in his hands, and his foot on the body of the dog that lay stretched full length on the hearth luxuriating in the warmth. As he stared at the red ashes, an earnest of how his future was to shape itself made him feel as if a cool hand were laid soothingly on his brow.

He must have sat musing thus for quite a quarter of an hour, when the St. Bernard barked. Carriage-wheels sounded without, and voices.

"How glad I am they didn't come before," he thought, full of gratitude for the blessings the last hour or so had rained upon him. He went out. A long waggonette full of men and lights stood on the dyke, and close behind it one of the smaller Halewitz carriages, from which his mother's voice greeted him, half choked by tears.

"Found!" he cried, gleefully.

There was great rejoicings at the news. His mother climbed down from the carriage followed by the stout lady-help, who was laden with a supply of dry clothes.

Elly had, of course, given wrong directions. For two hours the carriages had been driving about from village to village.

His mother went into the house with the clothes, and begged him to wait outside.

"Don't scold her," he called after her on the threshold. "She has already had her share."

"I hope that you were not too hard on her!" she exclaimed.

He felt that he was growing red, and did not meet her glance.

It was a long time before any one came out again. The servants stamped on the dyke to keep their feet warm. The brandy bottle circulated. The maids let themselves be tickled, and gave a suppressed squeal when the lads went too far. Some of them hummed now and again a snatch of song. He leaned against his grey mare. Sounds and shadows passed before his consciousness like a dream. At last, after about half an hour, she appeared, holding his mother's hand, in the doorway, her head wrapped in a woollen shawl and a wide fur-cloak flung round her.

The servants wanted to cheer, but he forbade any demonstration.

"Just think," protested grandmamma, while her eyes beamed with delight; "the little rogue did not want to come away a bit. Only when I had promised that Mamselle should stay and tend the sick woman, would she graciously condescend to follow me."

Hertha cast down her eyes and was smiling coy dreamy smiles. When she came into the light of the lanterns he saw that her whole face was radiant with great excitement. Her cheeks seemed rounder, her mouth like a flower.

"What a charming metamorphosis," he thought. "A woman all in a minute, before she has become a woman."

And when they had settled her comfortably in her corner, they began the homeward journey. He put a short pipe in his mouth, and rode in the wake of the carriage.

A soft breeze had risen, and drove the mist in his face. The grasshoppers were silent, and a great stillness lay on the world. Slowly he recalled one sweet picture after the other, and as they passed before his mind's eye, one in particular arrested him.

How expectantly her lips had been rounded to receive his threatened kiss, and to return it with emphasis.

He felt the impression of it still, he felt, too, the thin outline of the slight young form as his arm had encircled it.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" something spoke within him. "Don't hurt the child. Don't carry on a 'bud' flirtation."

XIV

WHEN Leo entered his bedroom towards two o'clock in the morning, in passing the little table by the bedside, a penetrating and peculiar perfume met him, a perfume that years before had often clung to his clothes and person.

Astonished, he turned the marble salver upside down, and between newspapers and books found a small ivory-coloured note with the device in silver of a baron's coronet, and a carrier pigeon beneath it on the outside. The handwriting was disguised. Nevertheless he recognised it at a first glance, and turned pale. He tore open the envelope with trembling fingers. The contents were as follows:—

"LEO,

"I trust you, and I trust myself, to make a meeting between us possible. It would be simply cowardice to avoid it any longer. It is time that we arrived at a clear understanding with regard to our position to each other and to the outside world. I will wait for you every morning when the fog lies on the stream, at the Isle of Friendship. For the sake of one who is dear to us both I conjure you to come. Our unhappiness makes it imperative that you should come."

With a harsh laugh he cast the note from him. It flew between the bed-curtains and rested on the pillow.

This was too good. He had struggled with himself honestly—weary days and nights, resisted and been proof against the excommunication of scripture, the appeals of honour and friendship, the exhorting of his own conscience, and now was all his defiance and hardihood to be swept away by this small clandestine billet?

"But what can I do?" he murmured, seeing his position with sudden distinctness. "I am in for it."

Still, there should be no question of repentance. Let all the priests and all the hysterical women of the earth enter into a conspiracy of vengeance against him, he would yet remain true to himself and his principle.

In one thing, however, Johanna had been right. If Felicitas did not understand what was due to the honour of her house he must be the first and only one to remind her of her duty. If it was true that their common guilt had really given him a power over her weak and vacillating nature, he must use that power for Ulrich's welfare. It would, indeed, be cowardice not to do so.

Besides, she was so vain that she might easily interpret his avoiding her as a sign that he was afraid to meet her because he had preserved the old passion intact in his heart all these years with dog-like fidelity. Nothing could be more absurd than such an idea.

Indeed, he never could have believed that love for a woman, which had amounted almost to madness, could have been so completely lived down.

He blew over the point of his thumb-nail. Not so much as that even remained. As far as he was concerned Ulrich might rest in peace.

And then he recoiled before this impure train of thought. His eye wandered to the wall above, where was the smooth wooden case, within which reposed a pair of unfailing comforters, that formerly he had thought a thousand times of resorting to in a distressful situation. He walked up and down the room and rehearsed the declamatory speech he would make to her when they met.

"Woman," he would say, "have you not a spark of shame in your composition, that you sacrifice the dignity and good name of the best and noblest of men to your childish folly? Hasn't your own sense of guilt taught you to take life more seriously?"

Just then he passed the mirror. A fleeting glance at it showed him, to his satisfaction, how tall and powerful and full of self-possession he would appear before her, the beautiful, smiling sinner.

"Our unhappiness makes it imperative." Her letter had closed with that hollow phrase. It could mean nothing. The child's banishment, the only event that could cast a shadow on her existence, had been her own deliberate choice.

Anger rose within him. "She shall answer for it," he cried, and shook his fists.

Then, in sudden need of air, he tore open a window and leaned out, drinking in the cool, damp night.

Over there, in the corner gable, was the girls' bedroom. The hours that had just gone by occurred to him. How entirely they had vanished, and all that had happened in them seemed a far-off dream. He shut the window, burnt the letter, and undressed, for he wanted to sleep for the two hours still left to him. From habit, he was going to place beside his watch and purse on the bedside table the ring he had been wearing, when he hesitated. It was one Felicitas had given him in return for a diamond one of his. He contemplated

the slender hoop with the line of sapphires, through the facets of which broke a play of light and dark-blue fire. Then he examined the inside, where, close to their initials, was inscribed the date of a memorable and fateful day. The custom of wearing the ring had become so mechanical, that he had kept it on his finger long after the last spark of his passion for the giver had been utterly extinguished.

"Now you had better leave it off," he said to himself; for if she saw it on his finger she might easily draw her own conclusions. He determined, when morning came, to lock it away for ever.

As he threw himself on the bed and settled his head in the pillows, he started up again, horrified, for some demon seemed to have enveloped him in the scent which the letter of his former mistress had brought home to his senses, and then he remembered that he had hurled the sheet of paper on the bed, and it had evidently left its traces behind.

And though he turned and shook the pillow, and finally tossed it out of bed, that powerful odour—a mixture of iris and opoponax, with which everything around her was saturated, a sort of symbol of herself—the cursed odour would not budge. It tortured him with hateful dreams one minute, and the next brought him back to a grim awakening.

At half-past five the gate watchman's long pole knocked on the window-pane, according to custom.

He jumped up with his head on fire, the blood racing and thumping in his temples. The morning douche did not brace him. He scarcely felt the cold water as it ran down his slackened limbs.

The weather was favourable, for the mist of the night shrouded the garden. The obelisk was a mere shadow, and there was not a trace of the trees to be seen. There was not the slightest fear of being observed from Uhlenfelde if he approached the island by boat. Why, then, should he put it off?

Quarter of an hour later he was galloping along the high road under the dripping branches. He was obliged to take the round by Wengern, as the only boat the nearer landing-place boasted had sailed away with Hertha the day before.

He left his horse at the farm, and walked down to the ferry with no spring in his step. He was scarcely yet awake to what he was doing. That in the next hour he would be standing face to face with the woman who had played the part of Fate in his life seemed incredible, and, at the same time, a matter of indifference. He walked on like a somnambulist. Only a pressure about his skull, a tormenting contraction of his breast, intimated dully that the path he was taking might lead to significant events.

Old Jürgens could not contain his astonishment at sight of his

master out on foot at such an ungodly hour of the morning. He got the boat ready for him in garrulous haste, distributing, by the way, all sorts of advice and warnings, and let the frail craft sink low in the water to ensure the master having a comfortable "push off." But he had not dreamed of the bright half-crown which dropped into his hand at parting. Now he knew what service was expected of him. It was the same as of old, "Keep your mouth shut."

As Leo moved through the mist over the grey eddying water, he felt the pressure which had weighed on the top of his head clasp his forehead like an iron ring, as if it would crush in his very brains. His limp arms had scarcely strength enough to keep firm hold of the oars. He let himself drift down-stream almost unconsciously.

The watery vapours welled and whirled all around him. They rose and rocked like masses of jelly that had been invisibly shaken and then sank again. Here and there the sun made its way in sulphur-coloured shafts through the milky thickness, cut circles of light on the water, and then by tremulous waves of mist was forced back and obscured. The water seemed to be rising hungrily in small bubbles, that swam about everywhere, and were driven by the circling ripples into the centre of the stream.

The banks had disappeared. Alone on the Halewitz side a fantastic mass of sedge and reeds from time to time loomed out through the grey vapour.

Then from the distance came a short shrill sound, like cracked sleigh-bells. It was ringing for the servants' breakfast at Uhlenfelde. The hour was six.

"What curious customs she must have introduced," he thought, "when she is able to slip out at this hour unnoticed, not once, but day after day."

He drew himself up, yawned, and let the cold water spray over him. Anticipation of the coming interview paralysed his limbs like a load of chains. Then gradually he began to feel brisker. Every stroke of the oars drove the blood quicker through his veins, and the first reflection that this renewed strength produced in him was, "Turn back."

But that would be insane folly. Rather he ought to congratulate himself that this inevitable meeting had been arranged in such a natural manner. There would be no necessity to set foot on Uhlenfelde ground, neither would he have to put Ulrich off with subterfuges, and afterwards he would be free as he was now.

He brought the oars out of the water with all his might, so that behind him gurgling whirlpools of foam dug the stream's depths.

Ulrich's peace; Ulrich's happiness. That was a goal for which he need not be ashamed to strive.

A few minutes later, when he looked round, he saw that the wall

of fog behind the keel was split in two by a dark urn-shaped shadow standing up like a tower.

His heart began to beat with violent thumps against his breast. "You are behaving just as if you were still in love with her," he said, trying to laugh at himself.

The boat crunched on to the sand of the landing-place, the only one that the island boasted, the bank of which, half washed away by the encroachments of the stream, rose steeply from the water with nothing to protect it but a tangle of lichen-covered roots.

Here a brook, that divided the island into two halves, had hollowed out a sheltered little cove, whose calm waters could provide accommodation for three boats at least.

A small gleaming white sandbank, shaded by a huge canopy of alder branches, formed a charming nook, above which the brook murmured and babbled as it came tumbling down to join the water of the bay in a circle of foam.

Leo's first glance fell on the snow-white boat, which a long, polished chain, stretching over the sand, fastened to an alder-stump.

So she was waiting for him. The clouds of mist that floated about between the dripping boughs of the trees, and became immovable veils around their trunks, wrapped the interior of the island in impenetrable grey. Not a sign of the temple even was visible.

He walked slowly by moss-covered stepping-stones along the brookside up the incline. The undergrowth was quite a wilderness of shrubs and thickets, through which a long irregular path had been pierced. A blue-silk scarf hung on one of the branches. Instinctively he put it in his pocket. It became lighter, and the mist lifted. The blackberry bushes that hitherto had densely covered the floor of the wood with their thorny brambles, now sent forth arms like heralds in the direction of the lawn, which was set in the midst of the shrubs on the highest point of the island. The ripening berries, blue-black and rose-red, glistened through the leaves, and big drops hung on the thorns.

Not far from the edge of the clearing lay the old sacrificial stone. He paused beside it and drew a deep breath, stroking with a trembling hand the shattered surface, to the hollows of which scarlet creepers clung, looking like streams of spilt blood.

His eye sought the temple, that resembled somewhat a beroofed tombstone, with its two pillars and the statue-group between, rising out of the mist.

The shivering figure of a woman cowered on the steps. She was leaning against the pedestal, and at his approach slowly raised her head, which, after a quick, melancholy shy glance, sank again into the upturned palms of her hands.

But that one brief glance was enough. "She is the same as ever," he thought.

From under the waterproof hood, which she had drawn so closely round her forehead and cheeks, that only here and there a stray lock of her fair hair escaped, there had shone forth the same sweet, pale face which had once held his senses spell-bound in blissful ecstasy, with the same mysteriously veiled blue eyes, and the same pathetic droop at the corners of the mouth.

She pressed herself closer against the pedestal, and made no attempt to get up, as, bareheaded, he stood before her.

"Felicitas!" he cried. His voice sounded hard and threatening, a little harder, perhaps, than he intended.

The answer he got was a tearless sob, which shook the supple, rounded figure on the steps. Without looking up, she withdrew her left hand from her face and stretched it slowly towards him with a limp, helpless action; the hand seemed to fumble for the one that should meet and grasp it. But the intention of greeting her in so friendly a manner was far from him, and so her hand fell, without having found any support, into her lap, as a wounded bird falls to the ground.

"You wished to speak to me, Felicitas?" he said.

Now she let her right hand, too, slide from her face, and the melting and reproachful look she cast up at him seemed to ask, "Have I deserved this of you?"

"She has aged a little," he thought, looking at her more nearly. She had a slightly worn appearance, although the oval outline of her profile curved in soft unbroken firmness into her rounded chin, and the milk-white forehead, over which the hair curled wildly, was of girlish purity and smoothness. But from the corners of the eyes downwards, delicate crow's-feet extended to the cheeks; the mouth seemed to have sunk, and on the brows faint, carefully drawn lines of paint had caught the moisture which glistened there in a chain of dewdrops.

"Extraordinary!" he thought to himself, repeating the reflections of the night. "How completely one can be cured of love for a woman." And then he said again—

"You wished to speak to me, Felicitas?"

In a low, hesitating voice, she asked, "And you, Leo, have not wished to speak to me?"

"No," he answered bluntly.

The corners of her lips trembled in a sad little smile, which, invulnerable as he felt himself to be, sent a stab to his soul. He must be severe, but not too rough with her.

"You must not misunderstand me, Felicitas," he continued, in a softer tone. "We haven't met here to make sugary speeches, or to

burrow in the old ashes. We must be open and frank with each other, however painful it may be. I intend to hurt you very much."

She breathed more freely. This unqualified declaration of hostilities seemed to soothe her. Then she drooped her beautiful head humbly.

"First of all," he went on, "so that there may be no cross purposes between us, I ask you—have you any regrets for what once existed between us?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said softly.

"Have you—have you, in short, an atom of liking left for me?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head wearily and slowly, like a sick woman.

"You may make your mind quite easy on that point," she said, still with half-closed lids. "There is no man in the world I detest as much as you."

"It is not necessary to go quite so far," he answered, with a forced laugh. "What happened between us was only what was bound to happen, as a natural course, after we had once——"

He stopped short, feeling dimly that he was giving confused expression to his thoughts; and then pulling himself together with an effort, he went on—

"The question now is, not what has been, but what *is*; . . . and whether you detest me or not is of no consequence. As I am here, I feel that I have the right to put a few questions to you. You certainly must answer them, for I stand before you as your husband's friend."

She smiled up at him, resigned to her fate. "Ask what you like," she whispered.

"Is it true what the gossip of the neighbourhood reports—that you—that you are deceiving Ulrich?"

Simply and quietly, without taking her veiled eyes from his face, she replied, "Yes!"

It seemed to him almost as if the masonry of the pedestal against which she leaned was going to fall on her. He was furious and disgusted, and pointing his outstretched fingers at her, he called her name in a choked voice.

With her perpetual smile, she folded her hands and said—

"I deceive him every day and every hour, Leo. My life is a disgraceful sham. Ulrich at my side is in hell."

"Who is the scoundrel?" he asked, grinding his teeth. "Tell me his name? You shall not go away from here alive, unless you tell me his name."

"Well, why shouldn't I tell you," she answered, with the same mysterious smile. "His name is Leo Sellenthin."

He fell back against the wall of the temple with a deep sigh of relief. After all she was only acting. Thank God! Thank God!

"Listen, Felicitas," he said then. "I am not here to be humbugged. . . . Still, you have not mentioned my name for nothing. Therefore, you shall answer a second question. Why—how could you dare, at the time when I was as good as dead, keeping dark, you know what, how could you dare to become Ulrich's wife?"

Her smile became more pronounced. It would seem as if she positively gloried in his anger. But she said nothing.

"Were you not afraid," he asked, "that I should ruin you for this deception—when once I came back?"

"I hoped so," she said, raising her folded hands a little off her lap.

"Felicitas," he answered, "I warn you . . . let this masquerading alone. You can gain nothing by it, with me. Again I ask you, how could you?"

Then she raised both hands quite, and entreated. "Don't bully me—don't bully me!"

"Well, then, speak!"

"I will tell you everything—everything," she assured him. "Only you will have patience with me. Say that you will, Leo?"

"Of course. Yes."

"You see, at that time—I must confess it to you—at that time my love for you was not yet plucked out of my heart, and as—you see, it was impossible that we should come together after Rhaden's death——"

"Why was it impossible?" he broke in. "Did I not, on the night of the duel, go down on my knees, and conjure you to fly with me? Why shouldn't we have begun a new life together over in America, or some other part of the world, if our love was serious? I had resolved to sacrifice all for you—but you. Well, all that is over. Let us not refer to it again. As it was impossible that we could come together, you were saying?"

"So I wanted at least one thing," she confessed. "Don't look at me, please. I wanted at least to be near you."

He could scarcely grasp what he heard. It was so horrible.

"As Ulrich's wife?" he stammered. "Felicitas, think what you are saying."

She shook her head, smiling. "I didn't mean that," she whispered. "Don't think so badly of me. All I wanted was sometimes to see you, to hear your voice, to refresh my ears with your old laugh. For don't forget, *then* I still loved you. If I sinned, it was out of love for you. Reproach me for it if you can."

He could not. His sister had been right, it was not easy to play the judge when one was a fellow-prisoner at the bar.

"Let us leave that time out of the question," he said after a silence. "I have got my answer—and that is enough. But we have more before us. Now it is the present, not the past, that we are concerned with. Is it true, Felicitas, that you have a train of admirers hanging after you, and that you encourage them to make love to you in Ulrich's house?"

"Yes," she replied, beginning her smile anew.

"Is it true that they write you letters full of gallantries, and that you answer them in the same strain?"

"Yes."

"And in spite of all that—Felicitas?"

"In spite of all that—Leo."

He felt once more as if his fury would overmaster him. He was almost suffocated by it, and he had to put restraint on himself not to fly at her as she stood there, in her defenceless beauty, smiling up at him.

"My God, speak!" he thundered.

"You have questioned me, and I have answered. What more do you wish me to do?"

"To justify yourself."

"I can't justify myself. If you would like to kill me, do it; here I am at your mercy. My wretchedness is unspeakable; death would be joy in comparison."

And still she smiled. If it was all hypocrisy she would cry, not smile, he reasoned.

"But I'll tell you everything," she continued. "Confess to you as one criminal confesses to another, who is bound with him on the galleys. For so you are bound to me, Leo—in unexpiated sin—in guilt, and in tears."

She stood before him with raised arms, like a perfect statue of the repenting Magdalene.

A thrill, alike of horror and admiration, ran through him. He knew that it was the language of the novelette in which she spoke. Nevertheless her phrases so moved and touched him, that his brain began to whirl.

She had come a step nearer to him, and stood confronting him with a face as white as a sheet, her breast heaving, and her lips trembling.

"When I became his wife," she began, "when I lay in his arms the first time, I had convulsions of fear. I thought I saw *you*, Leo, standing by the bed, with cocked pistol pointed at my forehead. And this vision didn't leave me till I was alone. So you can imagine there has not been much joy in our union. He is as unhappy as I am. But his unhappiness seems to me bliss compared with the torments that I have had to endure—helpless, alone, like a

fish out of water, struggling on the sand, and slowly expiring. Till then, Leo, I had preserved my love for you in my heart as something sacred. But after that it began to yield to a constant gnawing anxiety—fear of you—fear of him—fear of Johanna—fear of the whole world. Even when I was engaged, I had an attack of it. I thought that my letters to you——"

"I know," he interrupted. "Johanna told me."

She bowed her beautiful head with a gesture of pain.

"Oh, now I see who it is has hounded you on to me," she whispered. "But she is right. I am every bit as bad, every bit as corrupt as her hate makes me out."

He, on his side, interpreted all these passionate self-accusations into the one reproach, that his sister had prophesied—the reproach, "It is your fault."

"Don't exaggerate," he said, trying at the same time to reassure himself. "It's not so bad as that."

She gave a deep sigh of exhaustion, and leaned her head comfortably against the foot of the white figure of the youth that stood nearest her on the pedestal.

"Thank you for that little word of consolation," she said, speaking low, as if in a dream. "It is the first that I have heard for years. For whom had I to go to in my distress, fright, and remorse? Even the damned in hell have companions. I had none. And now you want to know how I could, in the midst of my misery, have the heart to plunge into a whirl of frivolous gaieties, and encourage strange men? I answer you that I sought to deaden my trouble by distractions. The panacea seemed so handy, and to offer such a convenient mask. I daren't lie to you. You see, Leo, that when the last spark of my love for you had burnt away—extinguished by fear and remorse—my last, my sole restraint was gone—I despaired of there being any good in me, and a voice cried daily and hourly in my ears, 'Now you may slide downhill. You can't escape your fate.' And so when people talked of love to me, I forced myself to smile, though a shudder ran through my limbs. By night, I cried; by day, I laughed. The only thing worth living for was to gratify my whims. So I was goaded more and more into despising myself. Often when I noticed Ulrich's eyes resting on me sorrowfully, I longed to throw myself at his feet, and implore him to save me. But immediately the ghost of my guilt—*our* guilt, Leo—stood behind me like a gigantic monster, and hissed in my ear, 'If you sacrifice yourself, you must not betray your associate.' Thus I have dragged on, weighed down by the burden—the awful burden of silence. It is a wonder that my body has been faithful to my marriage vows, so that I do not stand before you, to-day, an abandoned woman—so easily might I have been hurled over the precipice through despair in myself."

She was silent, and pressed her forehead against the edge of the pedestal, while her upstretched hands held on to the youth's foot, as if she had been the guardian angel instead of the evil genius of the friendship to whose symbol she clung.

The sun began to break through the mist. Its rays lay like a shimmering golden shell on the sacrificial stone which rose from the glittering dew like a gigantic pearl. Brilliant-hued butterflies flashed by the pillars, and now and again the song of a late-summer bird sounded softly from the bushes. The brook, which sprang out of the earth only a few paces from the temple, made a low clicking noise, then hurried away babbling into the valley, a scornfully laughing witness of this melancholy conversation.

Leo's eyes continued fastened on his former mistress. He was completely bewildered as to how to act towards her. There could be no further question of rebuke and blame, when help and counsel were needed and might save her. Yet what could he, what dared he do for her, without heaping guilt on guilt and introducing fresh deceit into the house of his unsuspecting friend?

"Lizzie," he said in a gentler voice, "you summoned me here. What do you want?"

"How can you ask, Leo?"

"I ask because I don't know."

"Why have you avoided me? Why have you made the poor innocent child a pretext for shunning Uhlenfelde? I used to think you had more courage, Leo."

This gave affairs an unexpected turn.

"I did not think further intercourse between us was possible, Lizzie," he said, "for both our sakes, as well as for your husband's and the world's. For what would the world say if it saw us interchanging courtesies again?"

"How calmly you ask the question," she answered, looking in front of her with her sweet smile.

"I have to think of you in this matter, as well as of myself," he replied. "And certainly I gathered from what Ulrich said that you shuddered at the thought of a meeting. Above all, it was your wish that my harmless meetings with him should cease."

"What else could I do," she said, "after you had expressed yourself so harshly about the child?"

"Harshly? Felicitas, take care what you say. I have considered the child's good. I would not have him taught to love me, and then learn to hate me—and you too."

"And yet you intended to take him with us to America?" she answered obstinately.

"That would have been quite a different thing, Lizzie. There no one would have known who I was. I should have passed as

his father. But here, where every servant-girl—but, my God! why do I waste words? You yourself must have thought of it long ago. Otherwise you wouldn't have sent him so far away."

"The child is gone," she said in a low tone. "Every night I pray and weep for him; but he is out of your way."

He gave a start of horror. "Then *that is why*, Felicitas," he stammered, "that is why you sent him?"

"If you wish to rebuke me for being a bad mother," she said, "do it. . . . I won't defend myself."

She folded her hands in her lap, and looked into the distance with appealing helplessness.

"Ah, it cost me a severe struggle," she continued, as if talking to herself. "Every night my poor boy appeared to me in my dreams, and I became icy cold when I saw how pale and wretched he looked. But, I told myself, he is young; he will fight it through, live and be happy; but I . . . well, you see, Leo, that this is my last battle; I know it. The torture of having to keep silence can't be borne much longer, remorse chokes me. Had I kept the child, I must have given up you, the only person who can help and advise me, and give me any comfort. What could I have done, then, but have thrown myself in the river. For they say in death it is easy to be silent."

Emotion and suspicion fought within him for the mastery. If she was capable of making such a tremendous sacrifice for him, it was nothing more nor less than saying, "I love you. . . . I love you still."

She guessed his thoughts. "Don't misunderstand me," she began again, "and think that I am trying to win you by tricks. Look at me, Leo! I am a mass of lies and deceit. My very face seems given me to dazzle and mislead, but hell is in my soul. And as sure as there is a God in heaven, so sure as Ulrich is sacred to us both——"

"He is to you?" he asked eagerly, drawing a step nearer to her.

"Yes," she raised her fingers voluntarily, as if to take her oath upon it. The expression of her eyes was pure and grave.

"Give me your hand," he said.

She laid her fingers quietly in his right hand, and as she did so her glance fell on the sapphire hoop.

"Leo," said she, with a sad little laugh, "I am glad to see that you still wear my ring."

He recoiled from her. Oh, fatal, cursed forgetfulness! Instead of locking it away when he got up that morning, he had stuck it on his finger as usual.

"Don't look so alarmed," she went on, "the poor ring has done nothing. Go on wearing it. Once it served as a symbol of our common sin; for the future it shall tell us that we are as one in being

truly penitent for what has happened; and if we ourselves can never be happy again, we will at least unite in making another happy, who must be dearer to us than each other."

"That is an excellent sentiment, Felicitas," he said, "and if you keep to it all may yet be well."

"If you help me, I certainly will."

He knew what she was aiming at. It was the same demand as the pastor's and Johanna's. He felt humbled. They were all of the same opinion, that there was only one road to complete expiation. Therefore he supposed they must be right.

"Repent nothing," had persistently been his watchword. But, after all, he need not relinquish it, when, sure of his strength, he entered his friend's house to bring into it the sunshine it lacked.

And while he was meditating thus, he suddenly beheld the woman lying at his feet. Her hood had slipped back on her neck, and the mass of fair hair, loosely tied with a blue ribbon, framed the lovely, melancholy white face in a thousand shining waves and little curls. He bent down, horrified, to raise her. But she resisted.

"Let me clasp your knees," she implored. "I will not stand up till I know that I am not any more alone and forsaken in my sin, that you will support me when penitence tears my heart—so that I need no longer be silent and despairing."

"I will help you, Felicitas," he said. "Only do stand up."

Her hands felt for his. "When will you come?" she asked beseechingly.

"When you like."

"Come to-day," she begged. "He pines for you."

"How long has he been back?"

"Three days. . . . Say you wanted to speak to me. That is enough. You are coming?"

"Yes; I will come."

She thrilled with pleasure. "I promise you," she said, "that I will no longer regard you as my bitterest enemy. That I will do my best to make you happy."

"It is not I you have to think of," he replied, "but Ulrich—will you make Ulrich happy?"

She shrank from him slightly. "Yes, I will," she said in a toneless voice.

Ten minutes later the white boat put off from the landing-place. Leo watched it from behind the bushes. She did not wave her hand in farewell, neither did she look round, and he felt grateful to her for it. When she landed on the opposite bank, it seemed to him as if she sank on the ground for a moment because she was either exhausted or crying.

He turned back to the temple deep in thought. The mist had quite dispersed, and so he was obliged to hang about the island, in hiding for another hour or more. Warm noontide sunlight lay on the lawn. Wasps with wide outspread wings floated humming about the blackberry clusters. A slow-worm crawled lazily over the half-dry pebbles. Now and then there came from the Halewitz fields a jocund cry, which slowly died away on the air. It was the ploughman working not far from the river.

Yonder lay his acres; his work, his happiness. Plagued by restlessness, he ran to and fro in front of the temple, the statues looking down on him indifferently with their frozen smile. The soft sandstone out of which they were sculptured had begun to decay. The full-blooming boys' faces had grown wrinkled, and were full of scars and pits, as if the leaves had rotted them. The arm of one was shattered as far as the elbow, and the stump projected from the upper part of the body like a post nailed into the flesh.

"We must get you restored, you poor fellow," he said, and drew himself erect with a broken-hearted sigh.

XV

HERTHA awoke. The flies buzzed about in the purple duskiness; broad midday sunshine came through the chinks of the shutters and the red curtains.

"I must have dreamed it," she thought, laying her arm beneath her head and laughing up blissfully at the ceiling.

And then she slowly realised that this time it could be no dream. A warm glow flooded her face. She shut her eyes and didn't think. It seemed as if her body were drifting, and as if she must die of happiness. What had her existence been yesterday, and what was it to-day? A wild hoyden had been carried down the stream, and then he had found her, and made her a woman with the magic of his love.

She jumped out of bed with a sharp exclamation, and began to dress.

When she stood before the glass she contemplated herself for a long time.

"How funny!" she said. "I look the same as usual."

She passed Elly's bed on tiptoe. The girl was sleeping away her tears and fright of the day before in rosy, peaceful slumbers. A fly had alighted on the corner of one of her eyelids. Hertha flicked it off.

"And *she* talks about love," she thought, and shrugged her shoulders.

And, as was always the case when she tried to put herself in the place of her companion, with her childish, objectless mind, a deadening, flat feeling came over her, which robbed her of the courage to believe in the happy result of what had happened yesterday. Perhaps, on further consideration, he would find her wanting in seriousness, and would take back his declaration.

The next minute she was ashamed of her poor-spiritness. It was inconceivable that he had not perfectly understood how boundless her love for him was, and how, in spite of her extreme youth, her early experience of the sorrows and trials of life had ripened and strengthened her character.

Ten o'clock sounded from the clock tower. She was alarmed at

its being so late. She would share every joy and sorrow and pursuit with the beloved in future, even early rising. And she resolved to get up with the call-bell, as of old, when she used to go to the milking.

Creeping about on naked feet, she went on with her toilette.

It was a mercy that Elly didn't wake. What torture it would have been if these first holy hours had had to be frittered away in idle chatter!

At first she thought of putting on her light batiste frock—the one with the whip-cord pattern—that suited her best, and looked so fresh and festive. Surely to-day was a festival—the highest of her life; and in half shame-faced joy her trembling soul scarcely dared look forward to the glory it was to bring forth. Then she gave up the idea. She wouldn't make herself gay and smart. Rather would she meet him modestly and neatly arrayed; so she chose a dress of dark tweed, and only relieved it with a jabot of pale blue and lace at the neck. This she thought gave her a sufficiently languishing look, and suited her complexion.

The St. Bernard's bark called her beneath the window. He was roaming about the garden masterless, sniffing along the gravel paths. She stretched her arms out to him joyously. Her tenderness for him knew no bounds.

"A pity he is not a man," she thought. "I would love him as my brother."

Then she left the room with her high boots in her hand, for she did not dare put them on till she was in the corridor.

The dog sprang up at her boisterously from behind the garden door, where he had been waiting for her. She buried her face in his leonine coat, to hide her burning blushes. If she blushed at sight of the dog, simply because he had been a witness of yesterday's events, how should she be able to conceal the treacherous glow when she met his master?

The breakfast-table, with its snowy cloth, still stood on the terrace. Three unused cups shone in the sun. It looked as if he, too, hadn't been there.

Her heart beat louder. Did fate ordain that she should be absolutely *tête-à-tête* with him? What would he have to say to her? What she to him? The thought so frightened her that her knees trembled.

"In another quarter of an hour," she thought, "perhaps I shall be engaged."

It seemed quite terrible—almost incredible. And how should she conduct herself in this trying ordeal?

"I must not just fall into his arms," thought she, "so that he will think me crude in everything, and misunderstand me again."

She decided to cut a handful of roses. Instead of the usual

"Good morning," she would greet him with these and a look that should say, "Take them, beloved. All is yours—all." She selected deep-crimson blooms, full grown with a wealth of curving petals. Each one would speak of love to him—of that wild, entrancing love of which poets sang so beautifully, from whose kisses one drank either eternal bliss or damnation. Nothing pale or faded should have a place in her bouquet.

But she did not adorn herself with a rose. Was he not to be for always the one and only ornament of her life?

Leo, the dog, trotted meanwhile behind her well satisfied, now and then rubbing his nose lovingly against her sleeve.

"Where is your master?" she asked him, with a sigh.

The beast looked up in her face with comprehending, melancholy eyes. For hours, since daybreak, he had been looking for him everywhere, but he had ridden off on a secret mission without asking his faithful friend to bear him company.

As she ascended the steps of the terrace grandmamma came to meet her.

She caught hold of the balustrade, trembling. What if he had already confided the news to his mother? Was she coming before her with a heart whose secret had been laid bare? She ran to her quickly, and hid her head on her breast so that she shouldn't be looked at.

The old lady patted her, full of solicitude. "No cold, I hope—no fever?" she asked.

Hertha breathed more freely. Ah! she didn't know.

"Let me feel your pulse," grandmamma commanded.

Hertha wriggled away.

"I like that!" she thought. "To-day, of all days, to have my pulse felt! Next I shall be asked to put out my tongue!" And she barricaded herself behind the table.

Grandmamma made the best of a bad matter, but she was not going to let her off without a lecture. Hertha, with quivering lips and wandering eyes, let the mild outburst pass over her head. Her gaze was directed to Leo's empty coffee-cup, her ear towards the courtyard.

And then suddenly the hound gave a howl of delight. Ringing, clattering footsteps came echoing along the corridor.

Hertha felt her blood ebb from her veins, and as if she must, at his glance, fall dead from shame. She dashed the roses down on the table, and tore at hot speed into the garden; and grandmamma, whose lecture was in full swing, looked after her in consternation. There was a nook in the yew hedge which ran out from the castle into the garden where, unseen, it was possible to hear and see all that passed on the terrace. There she quickly concealed herself.

He stood framed in the glass door, heated and dusty, with a deep frown on his brow which terrified Hertha.

Grandmamma gently reproached him. How was it that it was nearly noon and nothing had been seen of him before?

"I had business to attend to," was his curt, gruff answer. Then he sat down and played carelessly with the scattered roses.

Hertha was grieved; thus her pretty little plan came to nothing. Of course, he didn't suspect how significant those roses were for him.

"What are the kids doing?" he asked.

Hertha started. She didn't deserve to be called by such a name as that. But she comforted herself with the thought that he was trying to hide his secret.

Grandmamma gave him the desired information. Hertha had put in an appearance, but Elly was still asleep. To-day she might have grace and sleep to twelve if she liked—the longer the better.

He was hungry, and crumbled the toasted rolls impatiently. "What incapable dog of a cook have we got now?" he grumbled.

Grandmamma stood up to go and see what had happened in the kitchen.

"Hertha is waiting too," she said.

"Where is the little one?" he asked.

"She has scampered away from you once more, like a frightened hare," responded grandmamma. "I will send her out if I see her." With which she went into the house.

Hertha saw how he smiled to himself for a moment, then wrinkled his brows again in heavy thought. With his head buried in his hands, he sat brooding there.

Infinite compassion awoke in Hertha. "He has been bothered by some new trouble," she thought, "and his cares make his head ache. From now on it would be her duty to stand by him in time of trial, whatever her mood might be.

And with resolute steps, digging her heels into the ground, she emerged from the yew hedge. But when she reached the foot of the terrace, she reeled and was obliged to pause for breath. She had never imagined that one could feel such unspeakable fear of the man one loved better than life itself.

Now she was at the top of the steps. But, still lost in meditation, he did not look up. He held one of the roses between his lips, and chewed the stalk.

She was trembling so much that she had to steady herself by holding on to the corner of the table. How should she greet him? A mere "Good morning" sounded too commonplace and everyday. She sighed.

Then at last he looked up. A friendly, quiet smile beamed on his face.

"Good morning; good morning," he said quite naturally. "Why that deep sigh? Have we caught cold—a touch of fever, eh?"

She gazed silently at him with great wounded eyes. These were almost exactly the same words as good old grandmamma had used. Perhaps he too was going to ask to feel her pulse. Her hand fluttered in his; then she sank into an armchair, still not speaking. Again the dread overcame her that, after thinking it over, he had decided she was too immature, and would treat yesterday as if it had never been. And she would have no means of combating his decision and making him act otherwise.

"Yes—yes, that was a quaint adventure," he went on, as he stretched himself and put his hand before his mouth to suppress a yawn of fatigue; "but we caught you neatly, you runaway."

Her fears increased. If only she had not been such a coward —such an unutterable coward—she would have drawn herself to her full height and exclaimed indignantly, "Why do you despise me to-day? Don't you know what you have done?" But she didn't dare move an eyelash, much less look up.

And as she still remained tongue-tied, he bent over her, and, stroking her forehead, asked her, grinning—

"Have we made peace at last, dear child?"

This was a ray of light. She thanked God for it, nodded, and tried to smile.

"Well, well," he ejaculated in doubt, as she had not spoken.

But instead of an answer, she gathered the roses together and offered them to him.

"Do they belong to me?" he asked.

"Yes, to you," she whispered, with a shy, tender light in her eyes. He marked the expression, and a bitter sense of a marred happiness stabbed his soul. He seized the little brown hand in gratitude.

At this moment steps were heard in the dining-room, the glass door of which stood open.

"Grandmamma is coming!" exclaimed Hertha, shocked, snatching away her hand.

"Well, let her come," he said, in some surprise.

Then, as grandmamma appeared, followed by Christian, he relapsed again into reverie. He ate and drank, but it was like an automaton eating and drinking.

Her eyes did not move from his face. She dreaded to try and win a look from him, full of understanding and warm feeling, yet it seemed as if she had ceased to exist for him. She might be stupid, and of course she was, but this much she knew—that a man did not usually treat the woman of his choice in such a manner.

Meta Podewyl, for instance, and Hans Sembritzky were in love

with each other for a long time before he declared himself. They called each other "Herr Baron" and "Gradiges Fräulein" quite stiffly, and were outwardly like strangers; but their eyes could not deceive them. They spoke a glowing language which made all formality a pretence. And then! how dreamily and blissfully they had smiled away into vacancy, when their eyes might no longer meet! But he—oh, he!

With a low murmur, he stood up, shot his shirt-cuffs, whistled to his dog, and strode away without vouchsafing her another look. Without another look!

Later the same thing repeated itself. Hertha sat through lunch in dull misery. Two tears fell on the hands that nervously crumbled her bread.

Grandmamma had been sharply observing her, and it had not escaped her that Hertha, whose healthy appetite was proverbial in the house, had to-day scarcely swallowed a morsel of meat.

She slipped noiselessly out of her seat, pushed Elly aside, and caught hold of Hertha's left hand.

She jumped up as if she had been pricked by a needle.

"Sit down, and give me your wrist," commanded grandmamma.

Further resistance was useless. And the pulse was indeed galloping feverishly. Then she was asked to show her tongue. This she wouldn't do.

"Grandmamma, please don't torment me," she begged, and flung her arms round her neck, bursting into tears.

But grandmamma would not allow herself to be trifled with in such important matters. "Show me your tongue," she insisted.

But the tongue was still not forthcoming. Then ensued a sharp tussle, in which Hertha was defeated.

And this was how she was treated, and her heartache misunderstood. She was ordered to bed, and told she must perspire.

XVI

ON the afternoon of the same day, Leo Sellenthin reined in his mare at the gateway of Uhlenfelde. The heraldic sword amidst the three wide-jawed fish pointed warningly down on him from the escutcheon of the Kletzingks above the entrance.

As he wiped the sweat from his brow, a last faint "Turn back," breathed by the rustling leaves, fell on his ear. But he clenched his teeth, and rode on. To the left, on the same side as the stream, lay the house, a white slate-crowned bijou structure, resembling the country seat of a parvenu more than the ancestral castle of a doughty old feudal race.

It had been built at her desire, for the former gray castellated pile had not found favour with the fair new mistress. Two female figures in marble, representing peace and hospitality, stretched out their shining arms in welcome to the stranger from the parapet of the ramparts, which were approached by a terraced drive. Groups of widespreading palms, overarched by the ragged plumes of a banana, filled the space made by the curve of the drive. The jagged, fan-like foliage stretched up to the marble figures, which in their snow-whiteness seemed like rare exotic blooms in this wilderness of green.

Leo turned away from the house, for, according to the programme, he was not to meet Felicitas until he had seen Ulrich.

The spacious courtyard stretched its huge length before his eyes. Ulrich, it would appear, had been building without a pause during the last few years, for more than half the offices and farm-buildings had been rebuilt. Where once the long white clay wall covered with stubbly thatch had stood, there was now a row of brand-new brick palaces, with iron bolts and locks, stone porches, and a system of covered drainage round about.

In the yard, drawn up in columns, were the long waggons with their big strong axles, and their fresh-polished wood agleam. There were the ploughs—a distinguished blue-coated regiment, beginning with a bulky "Ruchadlo," and ending with the slender furrow hedgehog, a beautiful "Fowler" steam plough with double shafts—and an

engine at the head. The more delicate machines lay under the shelter of a shed; the drainers and the manure-scatterer, and the newest inventions, just arrived from England. There was also a "Zimmermann" threshing-machine, of the kind Leo himself so earnestly coveted, and a five-tubed apparatus for setting seed.

A feeling of admiration untainted by envy awoke in him. A good deal that he had only seen before at agricultural exhibitions, where he had been apt to regard it all scarcely sympathetically as so much machinery *de luxe*, was here in everyday use, its working capabilities tested and proved.

In another place, on wooden blocks, boxes out of the potato carts lay huddled together like unslain dragons weltering in the sun. Near the stable stood a company of iron-spouted kettles, in which during the winter the tougher-fibred fodder was soaked, and made easy for the mouths of the cattle to masticate. To crown all, there was a perfect reservoir designed by Wolf, such as only model farms could afford. Black clouds of smoke issued from the tall chimney which flanked the distillery buildings, for, although the distillery itself was not this moment at work, the steam-engine was setting in motion the dairy machinery, which was in full activity. Long rows of milkpails were ranged near it facing the sun, snowy white with gold-gleaming hoops—the tin strainers shining as bright as silver; the butter-churns and butter-separators, and all sorts of implements which Leo didn't even know by sight; at every step some new wonder was revealed to him.

"And what is *my* old lumber in comparison with this?" he thought.

Then a solemn mood overtook him, a feeling of reverend exultation, which banished all his fears, and for a moment let him forget what had brought him there. If it was within human possibility to accomplish all this by dint of energy and strength of purpose, why should not he succeed in a like achievement? He had only to push on steadily from the point at which he had begun, to throw himself heart and soul in his work, and to abandon frivolity and philandering for evermore. The elevating example of his friend before his eyes, the feeling of deliverance which it would give him to procure secretly his happiness, this alone would prevent his making shipwreck again of his career.

As he drew near the stable, a groom whom he did not know met him, and smiled up in his face with familiar impertinence.

"The mistress is not at home to-day," he remarked. "Two lots have had to ride away without seeing her."

"Speak when you are spoken to, fellow!" Leo thundered at him, so that with an anxious exclamation he nearly jumped out of his skin,

What a delightful understanding must exist between servants and guests when a complete stranger was received with this gratuitous officiousness! And how it was accepted as a matter of course that his visit was intended for the fair lady of the house!

He sprang out of the saddle, and was told that the master was with the horses in the paddock, exercising the two-year-olds. He walked in that direction, and the groom, who was probably in the habit of being tipped by his mistress's admirers, glared after him dumbfounded.

On the miniature racecourse which sloped towards the stream, Ulrich's lanky figure was to be seen, surrounded by a crowd of golden-brown thoroughbred colts, which were pressing against him to be caressed by his hand. Leo's heart smote him at the thought of the comedy of deception he had given his word to enact, and the victim of which was to be the man who was dearest to him in the world. But what was to happen was to be for his happiness and his peace of mind. Therefore he must go forward with it.

The colts, at his approach, bounded away half shyly, half roguishly. Ulrich turned round. Pure joy, succeeded the next moment by horror, lit up his emaciated features.

"You at Uhlenfelde?" he gasped.

"How do you do, little girl?" cried Leo, forcing himself into an assumption of his old genial manner. "Don't let your eyes quite start out of your head. You can set the dogs on me to chase me out of the yard if I am not welcome."

And then he repeated his lesson. How he felt things could not go on as they were, and he wanted to try if, by means of an interview with Felicitas, he could get to the bottom of the aversion she had expressed for him, and through an explanation put the relations between them on a more tolerable footing. Therefore he besought his friend to go indoors and beg Felicitas to see him.

A smile of hopelessness flitted over Ulrich's face. "It is altogether useless," he replied. "I am sure that she won't receive you. You don't know in what strong terms she speaks of you."

"That may be," said Leo, without daring to raise his eyes from the ground, "but at least make the attempt. Say I have come to ask her pardon, anything you like."

Ulrich reflected, and then said, "Very well, come. It shall not be said that I did not try, however little good it may be."

They left the enclosure, surrounded by the colts, who had begun to make friendly overtures to the stranger. But he took no notice of them. Mutely he walked at his friend's side, now and then giving himself a shake, as if he would shake off from his soul some insupportable horror.

Ulrich stood still when they came to the ramparts.

"In case she does consent, do you think it best to see her alone?" he asked.

"Certainly," Leo replied, feeling that he was not used yet to the distasteful game he was pledged to play in the eyes of his unsuspecting friend.

"Then let me go in to her, and you wait out here. Forgive me," he added, "but unless it is her desire, I cannot permit you to enter the house consecrated to her honour."

Leo nearly crushed his hand in his own, but he hadn't the courage to meet the eyes that rested on him with their fiery brilliance melting into tenderness. He watched him disappear behind the statue of peace. He fixed his gaze absently on the marble woman, who seemed to hold out her palm-branch towards him with a friendly gesture. Then he began to pace up and down the forecourt with long strides. He dared not think of what was going on indoors at that moment.

Quarter of an hour passed, when Ulrich, glowing from excitement, his long neck eagerly thrust forward, came out.

"Leo?"

"Well, old fellow."

"It was difficult, Leo, but she gives her consent."

"Thank you, a hundred times, Uli," he stammered, and blushed like a lying schoolboy.

"So far, she has only one end in view," Ulrich continued. "That is, to send you home humiliated and wretched. But you must see what you can do with her, my boy, and think of the fever I am in meanwhile."

Yes, he really was feverish. His hands trembled, and the blood throbbed in his temples.

He led the way, and Leo pushed quickly past him; secure already of victory, but as full of dread and shame as if he had been defeated. He found her stretched on a lounge, her face buried in the cushions. She appeared to have sunk down there after the mental excitement of the last quarter of an hour. A tea-gown of primrose-coloured, coarse-fibred silk hung about her limbs in *negligée* folds. His diamond flashed on the hand which she held out to him without changing her position.

"Shut the door," she whispered.

He obeyed.

Then she lifted her face for the first time. Her eyes were red from crying.

"How had she been able to manufacture tears for this farce?" he asked himself.

"Oh, I was so ashamed of myself," she murmured.

Ah! she had been ashamed; that would account for it. And he

began to console her. He told her this horrible hour must be got over. . . . Later, of course, there would be no more double dealing; every action of theirs must pass above-board before Ulrich's eyes.

"That was understood before," she exclaimed, offended that he had thought it necessary to remind her.

And in the midst of her distress she smiled at him—a coy, happy smile.

"Now he thinks that we——" she began. Her sentence did not end, but there was something in her broken words that made the blood mount hotly to his brow.

"That's bad enough," he growled, and turned his back.

There was a silence. He drew out his watch, and studied the hands.

"I thank you, Leo, for coming to-day," she began again shyly, after a little while.

"Didn't you expect me, then?" he asked.

"Oh, you know you might not have come," she responded with a sigh. "Such a woman as I am."

"Such a woman as you are! What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean that it wouldn't be surprising if people didn't keep their word to me."

He felt a bitter resentment against this sort of self-abasement.

"I must beg you, Lizzie," he said, "to drop this false humility. You are the wife of Ulrich von Kletzingk. As such, you have the right to claim respect, the highest respect from me and every one else. And who doesn't . . ."

He broke off and raised his fists, so that she withdrew frightened into a corner of the lounge.

"Pray, for goodness' sake, don't get so angry again," she whispered. "I am miserable enough."

"That is to be all over now," he said.

"What, my misery?" she asked with a disconsolate smile.

Then he began with vehement zeal to describe to her what he proposed the future should be. He had a double mission in her house. First, Ulrich's happiness; secondly, her rehabilitation.

With his assistance she was to free herself from the oppressive consciousness of the old guilt, she was to learn to hold up her head again, and to get used to a sense of reconquered dignity, so that it was not to be conceived for a moment that the most impertinent dared approach her with anything less than what was due to her position.

"You paint Heaven to me," she murmured, and a tremulous radiance began to gleam in her eyes.

"I only paint what it is possible to realise," he answered.

"When we open this door, Lizzie, all the old rottenness must be sloughed off. We shall begin a new life from that moment."

She pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and exhaled over him a cloud of the perfume she habitually used. The discreet delicacy of the iris was overpowered by the sharp sweetness of the opoponax, so that, half-suffocated by the pungent odour of the atmosphere around her, he made for the window.

His glance wandered round the one-windowed apartment, which had once been his own putting-up quarters; it was now transformed, regardless of cost, into the luxurious nest of a fashionable woman of the world.

The walls were hung with blue brocade; small gilded chairs, with butterfly-wings for backs, card-tables, tabourets and stools of every description, were dotted about, crouching on the Indian carpet like fabulous beasts. A gigantic fan of snow-white marabou feathers served as a screen for the stove. Bronzes and antique bric-a-brac figures, dainty and alluring, populated the cabinets; a marqueterie bookcase contained the mistress's favourite volumes, bound in ivory-coloured vellum, and an old Venetian altar-cloth was draped in coquettish folds over it as a curtain. Above the writing-table there shone in Carrara marble the dreamy head of the Vatican Eros, outlined with a bluish tinge, for the light penetrated to it through a blue and gold embroidered gauze background, flooding the room one moment with a subdued duskiness, the next with vivid flashes of sunshine.

The whole was an interior commonly enough seen in European capitals, but something quite unheard of here in the remote "Hinterwald."

"He spoils you far too much," he said, with a kind of paternal smile, shaking his finger at her.

"His kindness weighs me to the earth," she replied, pressing her milk-white face against the cushions.

Again he looked at his watch. "Time is up," he said; "we mustn't keep him waiting for nothing."

She lifted her hands in entreaty. "Five minutes more!" she begged.

"Why?"

"I am so afraid."

"Of *him?*"

She was silent.

"Don't be a coward, Lizzie!" he exhorted her.

"And it is so peaceful here, so harmonious. It's like being in a great wide forest. One dares at last breathe freely."

"Breathe away, then, and have done with it. One—two—and three," he counted, with the handle of the door in his hand.

Then he tore open the folding-doors.

The clear, hot light of the garden salon cut into the blue, heavy gloaming.

"For God's sake . . . wait!" she cried; "what are we going to say to him?"

"What our hearts dictate," he answered, holding himself erect, as one delivered from bondage.

She peeped shyly through the crack of the door, but at the same moment the door opposite opened, behind which Ulrich had been waiting the result of their interview. Unhesitatingly she rushed, with an exclamation of affection, into her husband's arms.

Two hours later the three sat together in the lamplight at the tea-table, happy in a feeling of possessing each other again.

Before supper Leo had been shown round the stables, had learned much, and wondered more; but now agriculture was forgotten, and friendship enjoyed its own. Ulrich was talkative and fluent; his joy buoyed him up. He could not value and appreciate the wife enough who that day had laid at his feet an almost superhuman testimony of her love. Every caressing look he cast at her, every lapse into thought, was a secret apology for having ever dared to think himself unhappy at her side.

She, for her part, treated him with such humble gentleness, was so attentive to his wishes, and looked up to him so full of admiration, that Leo was charmed with her conduct as he watched her, and could scarcely refrain from rubbing his hands under the table, repeating to himself over and over again—

"This is my doing. He owes his happiness to *me*."

Towards himself, too, Lizzie's behaviour was perfect. She was reserved without being stiff; she conversed in an easy, friendly strain without letting him forget that worlds lay between them. There lingered in her voice a tearful tone, as of one who has forgiven a bitter wrong without having had time to forget it, and who pleads for consideration on account of this shortcoming. Her manner seemed as perfectly adapted to the real circumstances as to the feigned, so Leo was able to lose the painful feeling of playing the hypocrite. In his satisfaction he blew down clouds from his meerschaum, so that the silver supports of his tea-glass rattled on either side. Now he had completely won him again for the first time, *he* who sat opposite. This domestic problem lay in the hollow of his hand.

The oil in the two branching lamps gurgled and boiled. From the depths of the samovar sounded a low, mysterious humming; the chirrup of the grasshoppers came through the glass doors with the rustle of the evening breeze in the orange blossoms.

It was a rare symphony of broken, veiled tones, a fitting accom-

paniment to shrouding the past and to meeting the future with its longing dreams of happiness.

But, still, Leo discovered something that did not please him in Ulrich's eyes, which were riveted on space.

"All of a sudden you have grown mum in your joy, old man," said he. "I'd rather hear you harangue us."

Ulrich laughed shrilly and rang the bell.

"Wine," he commanded the servant. "Virgin's milk—you know, the oldest."

Felicitas, who was bending over her white embroidery, glanced roguishly across at Leo, who knew as well as she did how jealously Ulrich guarded this priceless treasure of his cellar. Then she stood up, and went herself to superintend the order.

The friends were left alone. Ulrich confessed that even yet he could hardly believe in what had happened to-day. The reconciliation which once he would have thought natural and easy enough seemed, now it had been accomplished, something fabulous and incredible.

"Yes, yes; you are just like children who have kissed and made friends," he said, looking at Leo full of affectionate admiration. "How did you do it? You have only to appear, it seems, and behold the thorny hedge opens and the heart supposed to be full of hate flies out to you."

Leo laughed nervously, and said something about its not having been so bad as hating.

Felicitas brought in the wine, and poured the topaz-coloured fluid into the tall green rummers. Leo felt the gaiety, which always awoke in him at the sight of a noble drink, bubble up and master him; like a presage of ecstasy it rushed over him, sweeping away the last shred of all that had hitherto constrained him.

"Long live friendship!" he cried, raising his glass.

"And may nothing separate us three again," added Ulrich.

Thereupon Leo's eyes met Lizzie's for a moment in a rapid, consciously guilty glance.

If he knew!

The glasses clinked. A pure, echoing arpeggio rang from the superb crystal.

"I could wish that our lives might harmonise in such musical accord as that," said Ulrich.

Then suddenly he broke off, and the glass sank from his lips. He cast a searching look along the wall, then pulled himself together and emptied the glass with one draught.

Leo had followed his eyes. There on the wall hung the child's portrait.

Felicitas, too, betrayed uneasiness, and after a moment's con-

sideration she poured a few drops out of her own glass into that of her husband's, and, leaning against him, tenderly whispered in his ear—

"To the absent one whom we both love."

Leo pretended to have noticed nothing. Then, to clear the threatening atmosphere, he began hastily—

"It can't be helped, children. We must settle a thorny matter once for all to-day, however difficult it may seem to discuss it just now."

Husband and wife listened aghast. Lizzie cowered and gave him a warning look, as much as to say, "For God's sake be quiet!" Then her glance glided to the picture. It seemed as if she feared that he would be tactless enough to begin talking of the boy.

"Well, then, the long and the short of it is," he continued, "how are we to break to our beloved neighbours what has happened to-day, and what all its consequences will be? For I don't mind betting that they are only waiting in their Christian patience for a chance of putting a scandalous interpretation on it."

Felicitas gave a sigh of relief, and threw him a grateful glance. "What is your opinion, dearest?" she asked, leaning her chin in the hollow of her hand, and looking up at her husband with a childlike expression.

He ran his clenched fingers through his scanty beard. "Don't ask me," he said. "What are we aristocrats for if we are not above that sort of thing? We ought to exercise our own personal discretion as we please in such matters, and not trouble ourselves about the good or evil tongues of a mere coffee party."

"Bravo!" cried Leo, laughing. "A high-principled cattle-stealer, such as we have hung out there more than once, could not express himself with more admirable effect on the gallows."

"Stop your buffoonery," said Ulrich. "Why do we pride ourselves on being made of superior stuff to a grocer trembling for his credit? In our own domains we are little kings, owing allegiance to our feudal lord, and to no one else in the world. And don't we deem our country squirarchies something higher even than the high nobility, who are at the beck and call of the court, and bound to drag French and Russian satellites after them?"

Leo nodded, beaming with pride.

"And besides that, are not our lives full of work, and the fulfilment of arduous duties?" continued Ulrich. "So I should think we might be allowed to be the best judges of how to enjoy our leisure. What can the opinion of the world matter to us, if we know that our own method of procedure, regardless of whether men abuse it or not, is actuated by pure motives?"

"Ah, now you have got on your 'pure-motive' horse," mocked

Leo, who was in such a happy frame of mind that he felt he was licensed, as of old, to look at everything from the ludicrous side. "It is incomprehensible that a man who has written a book on the 'Feeding of Live Stock' can pretend that he is in a position to grow fat on the motives of his pure heart, leaving out of the question that every one isn't the lucky possessor of such an institution," he added, hardly audibly.

"But every one may snap his finger at public opinion," Ulrich maintained.

"There I am at one with you," shouted Leo, showing his even teeth and bringing his fist down on the table. And while Felicitas rose and appeared to have something to do in the dimly lighted ante-room, he bent over to Ulrich, and said in a low voice, "As far as I am concerned, old man, this lecture of yours is quite superfluous. My shoulders are broad enough, and I know how to make my way with my elbows. But there is a woman in the business——"

"My wife?"

"Right you are, your wife. We must be considerate for her. Women have their own codes of honour; . . . we mustn't tolerate her being placed in an anomalous position."

Ulrich was silent. He was always open to conviction; and he did not hesitate for an instant to recognise the full importance of Leo's suggestion.

Felicitas came back, lovely and deprecating, as if the conversation had been on some theme of farming or agriculture, which women are not supposed to understand.

But as the two men continued to stare before them in a brown study, she put in her word, with a pretty hesitation and helplessness, like one who is certain that she is going to say something stupid.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I think that we ought to make the world take the responsibility."

"For what?"

Neither of them understood her.

"For your coming together."

"How can we?" asked Leo.

"I don't know yet; . . . but I'll think it over. And when I have hit on something, I'll let you know, dear Leo, at once."

She spoke with such a comic, important little air that Ulrich broke into relieved laughter, and said, with jocose pity—

"Poor child! She's going to think it over."

She pouted, and while he caressed her small, curly head awkwardly she closed her eyes, and threw herself back against his arm.

He gazed down on his wife for a moment shyly and passionately, then rose quickly and went into the next room, in case his new-found happiness should unman him.

Soon after, the rich, low notes of an organ sounded on Leo's ear. In astonishment he listened attentively to the sweet, full volume of melody. There used to be only an old quavering harmonium in the music-room, on which Ulrich had been wont to practise his chorales.

"What does this mean?" he asked Felicitas, who was putting away her crewels.

She laid her finger on her mouth. "It is a new sort of organ that he has got from America," she whispered across the table. "Stay here, and don't disturb him. I must go and see if he wants to use the pedal-notes; when he does, he likes me to blow for him."

She went out noiselessly, leaving the folding-doors wide open behind her. A few moments later, candles illumined the darkness, whence the mysterious flood of sound proceeded.

Ulrich, lost in the music, was seated before a curious instrument resembling a cottage piano, except that it was built upwards in several stages, like a staircase. His head was thrown back, and he was staring at the ceiling. Felicitas, in her diaphanous dress floating about the rosily-glowing room like a cloud, laid softly a score on the desk in front of him.

He nodded his thanks without taking his hands from the keys. Then, transposing the key, he began to play the piece she had chosen. Leo knew it well. It was a Mass by Scarlatti, which, in old days, Ulrich had loved better than anything.

He himself had never been tired of girding at the antiquated fugues, which he had called "pictures of the saints set to music," but now, when he heard again, after years of wild wanderings, the old familiar homely notes, his heart was stirred to warm emotion. Fighting down his tears, he threw himself into an armchair which stood in a dark corner nearest the door, enveloped himself in clouds of tobacco, and meditated, dissolving thoughts, half formed, passing through his mind.

It was all over now, of course, with the plans he had made at his home-coming. Johanna might triumph, and the old chaplain with her. But what did that matter, after all? Ulrich's happiness was the main thing.

"And is he happy?" He asked the question with a momentary, horrid doubt of himself, of her, and everything good.

Then he bent forward and looked through the door. He devoured with his eyes the picture. If that was not happiness, no one was happy on this earth.

She stood by Ulrich in all her loveliness, encircling his long, lean neck tenderly with her arm, following the music with vigilant eagerness, so that she might be ready to help at the right moment.

"The vox humana!" Ulrich begged, glancing up at her.

She seized one of the stops, which sprang out with a slight click, and as Leo listened, there rose the trembling, plaintive sound of a human voice, struggling with fervent, imploring notes towards heaven.

"Was it not human what I did?" the voice seemed to be asking. "Was not the sin sweet for which I am now in sackcloth and ashes?"

Then there came into his head the old maxim.

"Repent nothing," roared from the depths of his being.

He pulled himself together defiantly.

No, in truth he repented nothing. He was not penitent. Now there would be no more secrecy. Ulrich was happy. Lizzie, freed of her old fears, was turning to her husband. *And the past was as if it had never been.*

"Leo, are you satisfied with me?" murmured a melancholy, wistful voice at this moment in his ear, and a strong perfume enveloped him.

He started. He was almost choked by anger, and was obliged to put the utmost restraint on himself not to hurl some coarse epithet at the head of her who bent over him with a resigned smile, as if she were a lamb going to the slaughter.

"If you want to be praised, go to your husband," he said roughly; and then he stood up to take his leave.

XVII

A FEW days after Leo's first visit to Uhlenfelde, which had been kept a secret, Frau von Stolt of Stoltenhof had invited some of her particularly intimate friends and acquaintances to an afternoon coffee. The Kletzingks had accepted, and, as it happened that both the young cuirassier officers had come home on eight days' leave after the autumn manœuvres, several county families, with grown-up daughters and nieces, had been added to the party at the last minute. This was done at the request of the master of the house; the wily old fox, having been for more than a year on the trail of Felicitas, wished thus conveniently to rid himself of the rivalry of his sons.

The ladies had seated themselves in the small salon with the grass-green paper, on which a collection of racehorses, framed in polished light oak, formed a kind of brown-rimmed lattice-work dado. The large entrance-hall, the pride of the house, with its wooden galleries and mighty chandeliers of stag's antlers, was reserved for the gentlemen. Felicitas von Kletzingk, to-day attired in a black silk dress, which transformed her usually *dégagée* charms into a sedate matronliness, sat on the right of the worthy Frau von Sembritzky, reclining in the depths of the capacious sofa of honour, covered with green plush, which formerly she had flown from as if it had been a veritable trap. Now she was following with sincere sympathy the complaints which the ladies, all heads of large households, were pouring out to each other. Her mass of fair curly hair, that she was wont to frizz out in the wildest fashion, was smoothly brushed back from her brow, and a modest gold chain surrounded the high plain collar of her dress.

The conversation, suitably to the season, turned on preserving. Frau von Neuhaus of Zubowen, a rotund sexagenarian with a greenish fringe-net over her tousled hair, had tried the new steam apparatus, and had found it, in spite of its apparent advantages, thoroughly unpractical. The Baroness von Krassow opposed this view in an exaggerated fatigued voice; and old Frau von Sembritzky, who, since the marriage of her son with little Meta Podewyl, was doing her very best to revive the tradition with regard to wicked

mothers-in-law, glared about her wrathfully like a teased vulture through the bars of its cage, as if she suspected that some one cherished the design of ousting her from the seat of honour. Meta sat next her; the poor young thing pressed the old termagant's hand in hers in nervous awe, while, with a longing smile that threatened every minute to become tearful, she glanced across at the table for "young girls" from which she was banished for ever.

The hostess herself had taken a place to the left of Felicitas. Bolt upright and stiff as a grenadier she sat there, and, though smiling down amiably on her neighbour, she kept watch that no stolen glances were exchanged between her and the gentlemen in the next room.

But even Frau von Stolt had not the smallest fault to find to-day with the much-abused young woman. She appeared charmed with the conversation, and, like a pupil thirsting for knowledge, she put in shy little questions in the pauses. Only now and then did she cast a wandering look along the collection of famous racehorses. No one noticed how her arms stiffened as if with cramp, and her fingers clasped and unclasped convulsively. She had dared much, and the next few minutes would be pregnant with events.

The ladies from Halewitz, as an understood thing, had not been invited. For the last two years every hostess in the neighbourhood had known that a meeting between Felicitas and any member of the Sellenthin family was something to be avoided. Otherwise the table consecrated to the young would have been less quiet, and enlivened by Hertha's sharp repartees.

Amidst the young men, too, there prevailed a subdued, almost depressed tone. The admirers of Felicitas hung about the door-posts, and ogled her through the folds of the *portière* in vain; for none had she to-day the old intense look and soft understanding smile. And as none of them could summon up the courage to penetrate to the corner sacred to chaperons, much that pressed for a solution had to remain unexplained. They wanted to know why for six weeks they had been ignored as if they didn't exist by the fair chatelaine of Uhlenfelde. They put their heads together, and exchanged observations with the naïve, unchaste laugh in which immature men of the world are accustomed to find vent for the illegal desires of their hearts.

Besides the sons of the house, there were in the forefront Hans von Krassow and Frank von Otzen, the two swells of the neighbourhood. The first, a brown and brawny youth of twenty-one, with a long jockey neck and retreating forehead, had been for half a term a Bonn undergraduate, but, on receipt of the first bundle of bills, his father had sent for him home again. Since then he had comported himself as a kind of uncrowned king who, for the rest of his

days, expects the whole world to be at his feet. And in the eyes of others, too, the reflected glory of those "kneips" with the Prussians at Bonn cast a nimbus round him. For the rest, he was good company, sportive, and full of lively tricks and whimsicalities, the heart's delight of all the barmaids for six miles round.

The other, Frank von Otzen, liked to be taken more seriously. His high ambition had been to go on a foreign embassy, but he had been ploughed in his exam. for the diplomatic service, and since was obliged to be content with helping his father to exploit the local coal-mines; but he retained the cryptic monosyllabic phraseology of diplomacy, used French soap, and went to English tailors. He was laughed at for his wide trousers, but nevertheless envied for his air of intimacy with the world of fashion.

Then there was the young heir of Neuhaus, an extremely fair, plump stripling, whose clothes, according to "Hinterwald" modes, were too narrow and too tight. He had a pair of big blue eyes in his smooth handsome face, and was so stupid that he was thought to suffer from melancholia, so that Felicitas had chosen him for the confidant of her elegiac moods. Benno von Zesslingen, who had once drunk three gallons unassisted, and Hans von Kleist, of whom there was literally nothing whatever to record, made up the party. These young gentlemen were the cream of Felicitas's train of admirers—"Lizzie's untamed team," as she herself dubbed them.

After they had lounged about the door for some time, still longingly expectant that their lovely friend would come to their rescue, Lothair Stolt said it was no use waiting any longer, and contemptuously ignoring the young girls, asked the others to go with him into the garden and start a shooting-match with papa's new pistols.

Old Stolt, who, as host, had been daring enough to approach the dangerous corner now and again with a joke, also abandoned the siege, and remembered that Ulrich von Kletzingk had asked his advice as friend and neighbour about a valuable half-bred that was showing signs of going blind after castration. He hastily tasted the bowl of peach-punch that already stood on the ice, and then set out for the stables, where Ulrich, with several of the elder gentlemen, was waiting for him.

Thus the hall completely emptied itself. Then suddenly there came a thunderclap in the midst of the pompous, now languishing, conversation of the ladies on the sofa. A servant had entered the salon, and was announcing in a loud, unmistakable voice, "Herr von Sellenthin wishes to know if the Gnädige Frau can receive him."

The last murmur died away. Every eye turned to Felicitas, who, as if turned to stone from terror, stared her hostess in the face.

The latter had quite lost her presence of mind. How could she let him come in with the coach-house full of visitors' equipages, and the hat-stand full of their coats and hats? It would be an insult. Pressing the hand of the trembling Felicitas soothingly, she declared that she must go out to him and explain. But before she could carry out this intention, the door was opened wide, and Leo's massive figure entered, with elastic step and much self-assurance.

It was true that his sunburnt face had lost a little of its colour, true that his eye searched the salon quickly and nervously, yet no one suspected what a struggle it had cost him to find the way here, and what a drama was to be enacted.

"I always was a lucky dog," he exclaimed, as he stooped to kiss Frau von Stolt's large red hand. She was still dumb, but had advanced a few steps to meet him. "I had made up my mind that I should have to beg each of these ladies' pardon separately for having been so remiss about calling since my return; but now I can make one solemn ceremony do for all."

This was rattled off fluently, as if it had been learnt by heart. Frau von Stolt, whose broad shoulders entirely hid Felicitas's, muttered a subdued "Welcome," and shook his hand as if she never meant to let it go.

But it was no good. Laughing, he passed on, and stretched out his hand (saying that they were all equally good friends and neighbours) to the first who sat next on the sofa to the hostess.

A long, terrified silence ensued. His right hand remained suspended in mid-air. Then *her* name rang haltingly from his lips.

Felicitas, deadly pale, slowly lifted her big blue eyes, and gave the clumsy hostess a look of pitiful reproach, as much as to say that the responsibility for the monstrous thing that was going to happen, if it caused a scandal in the house, would be on her own shoulders. And then she laid two trembling fingers in the waiting hand.

A deep breath passed through the salon.

Leo had bent down to impress a light kiss of gratitude on the hand which had been extended to him in forgiveness, and now he turned hurriedly away from her to Frau von Sembritzky, whom he greeted with the noisiest effusion. Thus there was no reason why he should remark that Felicitas, who was half fainting, was led from the room by Frau von Stolt.

The ladies, delighted from the bottom of their hearts that the painful situation had been so well got over, also seemed as if they saw and heard nothing; while Leo broke into exclamations of amazement at the sight of little Meta Podewyl—had he not carried her pickaback?—promoted to the dignity of a married woman.

The gentle little person, who in her lilac silk gown was enthroned so prettily among the older ladies, smiled, feeling shy and flattered.

Together with the others sitting at the "young girls'" table, she had gushed and dreamed about the fugitive. It was said that it was she who had composed the verses of the chorale, which every Sunday during the confirmation time had been passed round amongst them, and in which "foreign lands" rhymed with "sacred bands," and "home love" with "pure dove." But then Hans von Sembritzky had shown he was in earnest, and she had suddenly forgot her prayers for the absent hero.

Frau von Neuhaus, who had designs on Elly for her son, and so considered herself almost as one of the family, caught Leo by the arm, and led him over to the young people's table, where some who had proved less faithless were gathered.

The young creatures, six of them altogether, stood up and ranged themselves in a half-circle. They were all blushing, and all cast their eyes on their plates. There was not one in this bevy of girls who had not languished for him since she was twelve years old, who had not felt a romantic thrill at the story of the fatal duel, and the flight from his fatherland of the much-admired murderer. There were two younger sisters Podewyl, then Trude Krassow, Susi Neuhaus, and two bourgeois maidens with whom they were compassionately intimate.

Leo's eye rested with pleasure on the pale-golden and reddish-golden heads of the little crew who stood with beating hearts smiling at him. He was elated that the game he played was turning out so well. An ecstasy of success rushed over him, giving his spirits wings and doubling his capabilities of enjoyment. He squeezed each of the soft rosy hands, and gazed with the rapture of a privileged flame into each pair of shining eyes.

He had quite forgotten Felicitas; and then he took his leave of them in order to join the gentlemen of the party. As he followed the servant across the gravel path of the garden, and drew near the group of young cavaliers, he became aware that, amidst loud laughter, they were shooting at small yellowish quoits, which at every shot flew into the air and mostly fell to pieces before the bullet had even touched them.

These quoits were thin slices of Gruyere cheese (somewhat crumbly from the dry air), which with other good things had been supplied for the young gentlemen's six-o'clock light refreshment, but as the appetite necessary for their enjoyment was lacking, they had been turned to another purpose.

Bets were concluded, books made, forfeits paid, false starts announced just as if they were on the racecourse.

Leo stepped into the circle, which respectfully opened to admit him. He belonged to an older generation than these scatter-brains, the oldest of whom had not passed the first third of his twenties. In

consequence he did not "know" any of them, and had indeed scarcely set eyes on them since they had left school. After they had greeted him with astonished respect, a laughing babel of voices began to explain to him the newly invented sport.

He took them in one by one when they were not looking. So it was in the society of these cheese-shooters that she had sought and found enjoyment? How infamous! and, what was more, how ridiculous!

Lothair Stolt, as son of the house, invited him to take part in the game; he himself offered to give up one of the favourites, which had already been heavily backed, because it was certain not to fall to pieces before it was shot at.

Leo expressed his thanks, and said that he was a novice in this art.

"But you can shoot?" asked the young master of Zesslingen.

"A little, dear Benno."

They scouted his modesty. Every one knew that he used to be the first shot in the country; and who could say what fresh skill he might have acquired on the other side of the ocean?

"We won't hear any excuse," some one cried from the little crowd.

Leo felt in the humour for the prank. It was an opportunity, too, of reading a timely lesson to some who might later perhaps be disposed to make themselves objectionable.

"The revolver was our speciality over there," he said, looking round.

"We have one! We have one!" they shouted in chorus.

Lothair handed him a magnificent pistol with long blue gleaming barrels.

"But he must shoot at the cheese," called out Herr von Zesslingen, who, since he had drunk the three gallons, was looked upon as an authority amongst them.

"Just as you please," replied Leo.

The favourite, a fine slice of porous, golden-yellow cheese about the size of a plate, with firm rind, was solemnly handed to him. He carried it between two fingers to the mark, which was about fifteen paces from the shooting-place, and placed it on two of the pegs by which the circular target was fastened to the table.

"It must fall directly it is hit," he said.

The youths exchanged glances. One didn't need to go to South America to learn to hit an object the size of a man's hand at a distance of fifteen paces. The first shot was fired. The slice did not stir, and surprise increased.

At intervals of several seconds two other shots followed. The slice stood fast as if it had taken root on the mark.

"Will the gentlemen satisfy themselves that the target has not been struck?" said Leo.

"It seems pretty clear that it hasn't," replied Lothair, feeling that he might now safely venture on a little impertinence.

"All the same, I invite inspection."

Shaking their heads, the little group trotted over to the target. It seemed almost as if he had been pulling their legs. But not a trace of the last shots was to be found on the broad surface of the marking-table. The bullets must have stuck in the air. Only when Leo knocked over the slice of cheese with the nail of his little finger was the mystery solved. The slice had three pores larger than the rest. A bullet had penetrated through each of these almost without grazing the side.

They gave vent to an exclamation of awed amazement, for here was a man capable of choosing the very pore in his enemy's skin that he might fancy in which to lodge a bullet. Soon afterwards the older gentlemen came over from the stable-yard, Ulrich amongst them. When he beheld his friend laughing and joking with the youngsters, he stiffened and withdrew a few steps, looking almost shocked. Before he could open his mouth, Leo was at his side.

"Silence!" he exhorted.

Then he shook heartily: he hands stretched out to him on all sides. So soon as it was over he led Ulrich aside.

"We must keep up the deception," he said to him, "and seem as if we had not met since the day at the station."

"Why these hole-and-corner resources?" he asked, mystified.

"Because Felicitas is cleverer than we two put together," he answered, with cynical exuberance.

"She planned this?"

"Yes, of course."

"And wrote to you?"

"Equally of course."

"And then?"

Leo saw that he could not rise to the task of convincing his friend.

"Let her explain to you herself," he said, getting red and turning away.

On the way home Ulrich learnt what he wanted to know. Rocking herself to and fro, half-crying, half-laughing like a child, who fears a scolding and hopes to turn it off by being funny, Felicitas told him of the stroke of genius, which had resulted in Frau von Stolt interceding to bring about the reconciliation for her own and her guests' sake, which otherwise she would never have countenanced or forgiven. A dispensation of Providence had drawn the good woman

into the fray, to convince her, even while she resisted, of the holiness of such a work of love.

Ulrich listened, still vexed. "Why did you not tell me what you intended to do?" he asked.

"Because I wouldn't have my dear, good, noble husband mixed up in it," she replied.

He shook his head. He could not understand, even yet, how the two could have lent themselves to such scheming.

"It was all done for your sake," she whispered, leaning against him tenderly.

That night Ulrich spent many hours walking up and down his room.

"They lie for me; they deceive for me. For me they reverse all the laws of the human heart. Can such love as that lead to any good?"

And when he had put out the light, and stared into the darkness with searching eyes, the thought flashed suddenly across him—

"This reconciliation ought not to be. It is not moral."

XVIII

IT was too late now to turn back. And however much Ulrich Kletzingk might feel himself master of his will, he recognised the fact that he would not be able to bear turning back. He clung to the repossession of Leo with the whole strength of his passionate heart, which could never do enough to show its love. The greater the sacrifice which had been made for him, the more jealously he prized the value of what had been regained.

For the most part, things went on in their old routine. Leo was seldom able to come over, and then for only a few hours at a time, for at Halewitz the oats were not yet disposed of. When he did come he was in gay spirits, but in his solicitude for Ulrich there mingled a nervousness that was altogether alien to his nature.

The first time that he had made his way over and looked his friend in the eyes, his heart-beats rose to his throat, for he felt as if some misfortune had happened, and as if either anger or pain blazed at him from Ulrich's face. Then he seized the thin, transparent hands, which the summer sun had powdered with a heap of freckles, and as he pressed them felt thankful that his alarm had been uncalled for. But still it could not be disguised that something in their friendship had been severed—something which could not be cemented or grow together again.

Their mutual love had not lessened, their confidence in each other was the same, but a shadow crouched between them, and rose its full height when neither was on his guard. Ulrich too was conscious of this. The more fervidly he clung to the refound friend, the clearer he saw that the manner of their intercourse had altered. Hardly perceptible, of course. No third person would have noticed it, but it could not escape Ulrich, whose sensitive organism longed for the sunshine of harmless gaiety. Leo's jokes were rarer. He weighed his words, and sometimes stopped short in the middle of a sentence as if considering whether what he was going to say would hurt his friend's feelings.

"Don't treat me as if I were a brittle article," he besought him once. "You know I can stand a puff of wind, and you used not to spoil me."

"Perhaps not," replied Leo, wrinkling his forehead; "the devil knows how it is that I have suddenly got into this mincing way."

After the manner of sturdy country squires, Leo, in old days, had delighted to crack broad jests, which though in themselves distasteful to Ulrich, he had let pass with a smile, feeling that no side of human nature ought to be ignored.

It occurred to him now that Leo avoided all reference to sexual subjects, and had ceased to retail gallant adventures.

"Have you secretly gone over to the monks?" Ulrich asked once.

"Why?"

"Because women don't seem to exist for you now."

"A time comes when one gets sick of that sort of thing," Leo answered, and quickly turned the conversation into another channel.

A vague feeling of shyness kept him at a distance from the castle. He much preferred to get his friend out into the fields and plantations where they would ride silently side by side.

But while they were trying, out of doors, to enjoy once more the old communion of interests, which had so long been sacrificed, Felicitas, hidden behind the curtains of one of the balcony windows, cast wistful eyes after them.

She had no just cause for complaining of Leo. He scarcely ever omitted at the end of his visits to seek a short interview with her. And when time would not allow of this courtesy, she received through Ulrich his greetings and apologies. His manner towards her was uniformly natural and kind. There was something in it of brotherly camaraderie, half respectful, half facetious; and the pressure of his hand, and the expression in his eyes, betokened sincere and warm friendship. In short—she ought to have been content.

Nevertheless it dispirited and hurt her that no look or syllable of his ever recalled what she had once been to him. It would seem as if not the slightest trace had been left in his memory of that mad, blissful time, vivid pictures of which lived on in hers; for despite all pain, she could not banish them. What she had done for him was in vain if he had thus erased everything from his mind, and made it blank to the past.

She cried a good deal in these days, declared that her life had been a failure, and revelled in old memories, which, whether painful or sweet, filled her soul with bitterness. She looked back and saw herself from earliest childhood, a burden to unknown relations, parentless and homeless: an adventuress through circumstance on the look-out for lucky chances.

She had never known her mother; her father, an impecunious officer, had been embittered by an unsuccessful career, and out of disappointment at his discharge, had taken his own life.

From his grave-side she had been taken by an old-maidish aunt to her institution, where for three years she had gazed with yearning through a barred window on the forbidden street. Then other relations sent her to a fashionable Belgian school, where the pious sisters instructed her in the art of dancing and embroidery, and inculcated coquetry; and next, by one of those turns of fate which characterised the years of her early girlhood, she found herself transported to the solitude of a Polish magnate's estate. From there, after various stages of transition and misery, she passed into the circle of Halewitz, which, in spite of several efforts to get away from it—for she dearly loved change—she was destined to take root in. After all, it was the only place where she was not forcibly reminded of her helplessness and homelessness; and, what was more, where her bewitching personality was allowed to unfold itself according to her sovereign will.

At that time there had been a little flirtation between her and Leo—the innocent prelude to their later guilty liaison. It had passed without leaving any serious consequences behind.

The first to approach her in earnest with a proposal was Herr von Rhaden, the proprietor of Fichtkampen, a former loose-liver, and at one time a crony of old Baron Sellenthin's. He was at the end of his forties, sallow, grizzled, and gallant. Felicitas, admired as she knew herself to be, said "Yes" without much reflection. For since her thirteenth year, she had determined to take the first husband she could get, to throw herself into his arms whether he was the best or worst of men, so that she might be released from her forlorn situation by an early marriage.

Thus, at nineteen, she migrated to Fichtkampen; became mother of a son; danced, rode, made point lace, played patience, and waited for the advent of the hero whom the cards promised her. She would gladly have flirted, only the cantankerous disposition of her elderly husband would not have permitted it. First, *faute de mieux*, and then, really to satisfy her heart's hunger, she attracted Leo to her again. As a friend of her youth, and a second cousin, he was placed beyond her husband's jealous suspicion, and so things happened as they were bound to happen.

The famous duel which made her a widow was the climax. It would have been sheer insanity to remain a widow, and no one blamed her when, after nearly two years' mourning, she accepted the hand of the grave and high-minded Ulrich von Kletzingk, although he was the bosom-friend of the man who had killed her first husband.

Now, for the first time, she was free, and enjoyed the liberty she had so long yearned for. Ulrich's patience was admirable. He guessed that a secret repugnance alienated her from him, the sickly man;

as his innate refinement of feeling would not allow him to take by force what was not readily acceded, he put a bridle on his own wishes. His self-denial did not make him reproach her. She found in her husband her ready and sincerest friend, while she engaged in flirtations with the gentlemen of the country round, scoring triumphs which fed her vanity. But happy she was not. It was part of her nature to luxuriate in feeling unhappy. It raised her in her own esteem to a higher sphere, and increased the charms of her personality. She posed to the world defenceless and lovely, with a veil of melancholy draping transparently the mystery of a soul devoured by a secret desire.

She knew perfectly well that with Leo's return a new epoch in her life had opened. Folly was at an end; her existence had become serious once more. It seemed to her clear that she didn't, perhaps never had loved him, and daily and hourly she repeated this assertion to herself, as his image rose before her again, laughing as of old, and would not be obliterated from her mind any more. He roused her animosity, at times she almost hated him; yet a gnawing, anxious curiosity drew her to him irresistibly.

During the first eight days of his return, she had given her train of admirers their *congé*; then she went further, and sacrificed her child. She had found a thousand ways of deceiving herself into justification of the act. She scarcely knew, and she didn't want to know, what she was doing. Even the goal that she thought to attain by it was misty and vague. Now the child had been gone nearly a second month, and a dull anxiety filled the place in her heart left empty by her motherly care for him.

One afternoon, when Ulrich was out, she took the letters from the postman, and a note from Paulchen fell into her hands which increased her anxiety. It ran—

"DEAR PAPA AND DEAR MAMMA,

"It isn't nice here, and I should like to come home at once. And I am very frightened. And we have to get up at six o'clock in the morning, and then I get the morning banging from the boys, because I am the youngest. If I was not the youngest, some one else would get the banging; but, as I am the youngest, I get it. After dinner, there is the afternoon banging, and after supper, the evening blessing, and that hurts worst of all. Lotzen is the strongest boy. He can spin a top splendidly; but he does everything else badly. But he says it doesn't matter, because he is going to be a general; his uncle is a general, and that is why he will be a general, too. I should like to be a landowner. I wish

I was not so frightened. How is Fido? And now I must say good-bye.

"Your

"PAUL.

"P.S.—It is 123 days to Christmas. One of the boys has counted it up."

A sharp struggle went on that day within her. She stood before Paulchen's photograph, stared at it, wrung her hands, and pressed them against her brow. In sheer fear, her face lengthened.

"What will be the end of it?" she stammered. "What can be the end of it?"

Then she threw herself on the sofa, cried, prayed, and finally resolved to keep the letter a secret from her husband. For she knew what he was. She knew that he would never consent to the child staying another moment in a place where his life threatened to become a torment to him. But his being brought back must be prevented at any cost, or her ends could never be achieved. She felt driven to resort to means of watching over the fate of her child as a loving mother, without making Ulrich a participator in her anxiety.

There was an old sewing-woman in the house, Minna by name, who in other days had been her confidante and factotum. She had taken letters to Leo, and had mounted guard for them at the garden gate. More lately she had rendered assistance in the more harmless goings on with the boys of the neighbourhood. She was always on the spot when wanted, and when it was necessary to cloak and mask things.

That same evening Felicitas shut herself in her sanctum, and with a fluent pen wrote the following answer—

"MY DEAREST PAULCHEN,

"You must never write such letters to papa again. Then poor papa, as you know, is often ill, and if you cause him anxiety he will distress himself and get worse. You would not like to make him worse, would you? Happily, I have managed to keep your last letter from him. For the future, you must only write to papa that you are feeling happy and getting on well. But if you would like to pour out your heart to your mamma, put your little letter in one of the enclosed envelopes; then it will reach me safely through old Minna, who sends her love to you. As to the treatment you have to put up with from your schoolfellows, I shall probably write and complain of it to the head-master, for such roughness certainly ought not to be allowed in a boarding-school, meant only for boys of good family. But don't you think you have exaggerated a little, my

darling boy? What they do to you is done in fun, you know. And then, you want to grow up a brave man, and so you must try and bear teasing, and laugh at pain. Have you thought of that?

"A thousand kisses, my own sweet Paulchen,

"From your very loving

"MAMMA."

She addressed half a dozen envelopes with the address under which she had received other clandestine letters. It was—

"Fräulein Minna Huth,

"Münsterberg,

"Poste restante."

Then she put all together into a big envelope, and rang for old Minna, to whose secret care she entrusted the missive.

The sewing-woman, a withered hag with a large parchment-coloured face in which her toothless jaws incessantly champed, rejoiced in the new intrigue. She clung to her beautiful young mistress with the faithfulness of a pampered dog, and her only ambition was to be useful to her. Paulchen's scrawls would be as safe in her hand as formerly the outpourings of amorous souls.

The danger of the little boy's return was thus averted; but Felicitas was no happier. She longed so intensely to see Leo, for once, alone. She had proved that she understood how to sound the depths of his soul. But it was clear as daylight that he avoided being *tête-à-tête* with her. He always chose with punctilious exactitude the hours for his visits when Ulrich was to be found in the yard, and turned invariably towards the stables instead of dismounting before the portico.

"Is this the reward for the sacrifice I have made in becoming reconciled with him?" she asked herself; but she did not take into consideration that the self-sacrifice only existed in Ulrich's imagination. In her heart's estrangement, she almost thought of resorting again to the old flirtations for distraction. "Enjoy yourself, deaden yourself with the old pleasures," she said to herself, "so that he will see how things are with you, and approach you again."

But she hurled the temptation from her. Looking into her mind and probing it to the sad depths, she saw clearly that she must spurn low standards and dishonest means, if she was to preserve the power of conjuring up the beautiful and pathetic picture which she delighted to dwell on as the reflection of her soul. "Be noble, let your motives be exalted," a voice said within her; "perish like a vestal who offers up body and soul as a sacrifice. Renunciation is beautiful. How wonderful, without desires or inclination, to fade

slowly away." A shiver ran through her as the word "fade" echoed within her. She repeated it with trembling lips. Then she went to the mirror, folded her hands, and contemplated herself for a long time. So fair, so young, yet fated to wither and die.

A well-known picture of Queen Marie Antoinette came into her mind, representing her in prison, with folded hands, behind a bed-screen, glancing heavenwards, chaste and resigned. She fetched a lace fichu, which she knotted loosely on her bosom. The resemblance seemed to her most striking, though in reality her pretty Watteau-like face had nothing at all in common with the haughty features of the aquiline-nosed daughter of the Hapsburgs. "So fair and so young to perish thus," she repeated. She almost fancied that she felt the cold steel of the guillotine fall upon her neck. "Poor, poor Queen," she whispered, and tears of belated compassion filled her eyes.

The uneasiness which Leo's distance caused her, gave her no more peace of mind. Indeed every day it grew worse, so that at last, after thinking and thinking it over, she conceived an enterprise, the boldness of which nearly took her breath away.

The only road to Halewitz for her she knew lay over Johanna's threshold; and she resolved to take it.

"Don't you find," she said at lunch to Ulrich, in a low voice, "that your intercourse with Leo leaves much to be wished for as regards freedom?"

Ulrich gave her a hurried, alarmed look. Was it, then, as plain as a pikestaff that which he had hardly dared own to himself?

She confided to him her observations. His visits were too rare and too fleeting; and, above all, he seemed to think he must hold aloof from her.

"It has never occurred to me," he said, much relieved.

"But, my dearest," she replied, "we women have quicker insight into such things. I rejoice from the bottom of my heart over his scruples, but they are really no longer necessary; and that there may be no further doubt about the sincerity of my forgiveness, and that you, too, may not doubt it, mistrustful man, I propose that we order round the new landau this afternoon and drive over to Halewitz."

He was so astounded that he nearly dropped his wine-glass.

"But your rupture with Johanna?" he asked. "I thought you were deadly enemies."

She shrugged her shoulders, laughing lightly. "Women's squabbles," she explained; "I can easily put that right."

"I never asked you the reason of that feud," said he; "but perhaps now the time has come when I may."

"Don't be curious, beloved," she whispered, and at this moment,

noticing that the bailiffs had done rolling up their serviettes, she threw them a friendly "Gesegneter Mahlzeit," accompanied by a fascinating smile, which filled the poor devils, who were a long way off being society men, with extreme delight. "Doesn't it seem, Uli, as if the whole of your staff were in love with your little wife?" she asked, when they were alone together, nestling within his arm to receive the customary kiss after meals.

He was going to administer an affectionate rebuke, for this kind of pleasantry was abhorrent to him, when he remarked that her whole body trembled with excitement.

"What is the matter?" he asked in alarm.

She drew away from him quickly. "With me!" she laughed; "what should be the matter? The carriage will be round at four. Yes?"

XIX

ON the outskirts of Halewitz Park, half hidden in the shrubs, there stood a lonely, grey, one-storied house, the five windows of which were surrounded by stucco spirals and flourishes, which gave it an air of incongruous frivolity. The front looked out on a field path, while the gable and back walls were buried in the greenery of the park.

No sound of what was going on in the courtyard of the great house penetrated here, only from time to time a plough or a harvest waggon passed on its way home, and the melodious shout of a half-childish woman's voice, the joyous barking of a playful dog echoing it, came through the thicket. Every morning, at an early hour, a troop of poorly, though neatly clad children, bare-headed and bare-footed, aged from three to seven, assembled at the gate, the little ones holding the hands of their elders, or in some cases led by their mothers—wretched, prematurely faded creatures, bowed to the earth with the double burden of work in the fields and child-bearing.

At seven o'clock the iron gate opened, and the children streamed into the pleasance, climbed the steps, and disappeared into the house. Almost directly afterwards the shrill chorus of children's voices was to be heard by passers-by on the road, led by a deep, slightly cracked woman's alto.

When the dinner-bell sounded from the other side of the park, the door opened again, and the little troop came out and trotted towards the village.

Then all was quiet again around the lonely house, only an anæmic servant girl moved now and then backwards and forwards between the cellar stairs and the front door. Not till after the vesper hour did footsteps, light yet energetic, sound from the direction of the park, breaking through the undergrowth to cut off the curves of the pathway.

It was Hertha, come to pay her daily visit to her stepmother. The relations between mother and daughter had never been very intimate. The gloom that had overshadowed Johanna's temperament, her sybilline air, the atmosphere of incense and carbolic with which she was surrounded, all combined to repel the child with her

craving for light and joy, and to make a close affection between her and her stepmother impossible. Yet, in her innermost heart, she cherished a sentiment of gratitude towards her as the benefactress who had opened a new world of love to her, the homeless one, by introducing her into her parental house.

Hertha would have considered it her duty to accompany the Countess Prachwitz when, after the explanation with her brother, she had retired to the dower-house; but her stepmother had herself opposed the plan, saying she would rather be alone with her God. Since which it had been the rule for Hertha to spend an hour with her every day, an hour in which, according to her lights, Johanna made a point of ministering to the madcap child's soul.

Hertha had to read bulky devotional books, into whose dreary waste of prayers a fervid hymn flamed up here and there like a bonfire on a rainy day.

In the middle of such an improving hour was it that mother and daughter were sitting together at the open window, the outside blinds of which were let down, so that a dim green dusk was all that was reflected within, of the brilliant sunlight without. Hertha read in a monotonous voice (which was a little husky from a too prolonged swim the day before) the good old formulas by which for centuries men in their direst need have found their spiritual daily bread. In the happy irresponsibility of her sixteen years, she did not let them disturb her. Indeed, the God to whom she prayed for the man she loved earnestly every night, Who spoke to her comfortingly out of the rustling leaves and wrathfully in the rush of the storm, was on the whole a stranger to her.

While the reading was going on, there was a knock. It was some one who knocked softly and timidly once, and then after a pause, as if gathering the necessary strength, a second time.

The countess was greatly put out at the interruption, so strictly forbidden at this hour of the afternoon.

"Go and see who it is, and send them away," she said.

Hertha went and opened the door, and found herself standing opposite the daintily clad figure of a young and beautiful woman, deadly pale, who looked at her with great imploring eyes; with difficulty she collected herself sufficiently to ask what she wanted.

But scarcely had the unknown's trembling lips mentioned her mother's name, than there was a cry behind her. The countess had torn the handle of the door out of her grasp, and said in a hoarse voice—

"Felicitas, *you?*"

The strange woman covered her pale sweet face dumbly with both hands.

And at the same moment Hertha felt herself pushed violently

out into the passage. The key turned twice in the lock. The lady had gone in with her mother, and she was alone in the dusk.

And then she ran, driven by a secret dismay, down the shaky steps, through shrubs and bushes, by woodland path and lawn, past the garden-house and pond, to where joyous laughter rang down from the terrace with a reassuring sound.

The two whilom girl-friends confronted each other. The one, humble and supplicating, leaned against the door as if she hardly dared set one foot before the other, a cowering, crushed penitent, yet triumphant in personal charm, radiantly beautiful in her slender youthfulness of figure and the grace of her movements. The other stood erect, triumphantly sure of victory, filled with a sense of her high principle and stainless morality, supreme in the realm of self-torturing virtue, invulnerable in suffering, and proof against temptation, but at the same time faded and withered, with the hard lines of perpetual renunciation round her mouth, with lean throat and hollow cheek, and the smouldering fire of unattained wishes in her sunken eyes, a conqueror, but also a defeated woman. Johanna was the first to break silence.

"Have you considered what will be the consequences of taking this step?" she asked.

Felicitas bowed her head still lower.

Johanna did not accept this gesture as an answer. "You seem to have a short memory," she burst forth contemptuously.

"I have thought it all over, and remember everything," Felicitas breathed.

"Then you are prepared for your husband's eyes being opened to what you are, to-morrow?"

For the first time Felicitas gave her a direct look, touching, hopeless, yet withal collected.

"Why wait till to-morrow?" she said, in the same low tone. "He is here."

A faint colour spread over Johanna's face. "Here! do you mean in this house?"

"No; over at the castle."

"What for? It is a long time since he was there."

"I asked him to come, Johanna."

The two women looked at each other for a while in silence, one full of suspicion, the other of seraphic resignation. Then Johanna drew a step nearer.

"Felicitas, you are playing a dangerous game," she said.

"I want to end it, Johanna."

"And that is why you have brought him?"

"I thought I would make it simple for you, Johanna."

Again silence reigned. Then Johanna said, with averted eyes—

"Why do you stand at the door? You may come nearer if you like."

"Thank you," whispered Felicitas. She approached an armchair with quaking knees, and clung to the back for support.

"Speak out," said Johanna. "What has brought you here?"

"Necessity," murmured Felicitas—"the necessity of my soul."

Johanna laughed out loud. "Really, your phrases are as good as ever. And what can I do for your soul's necessity?"

"Despise and scout me," said Felicitas. "You have the right; but believe me when I say that I am no longer what I was. . . . I am not the same as I was when you cast me off. Then I was cowardly and bad. To-day I come back to you purified and courageous, and the reason that I stand before you thus, Johanna, is"—her face lighted with enthusiasm—"is because he, in the two years of our married life, has made me what I am. I owe it to him."

Johanna shrugged her shoulders. She thought of the gossip in everybody's mouth about the flirtations of the fair chatelaine of Uhlenfelde.

"Your reputation is not above reproach, Felicitas," said she. "Is that also his doing?"

"What? Johanna?"

"I mean what people say about you?"

"I must ask you, then, first what it is people say about me? No; but I am too proud to defend myself. That I can make such a boast is his doing likewise."

And she spread out her arms, while in her mind she replaced Ulrich's name with Leo's.

Johanna passed her hand over her brow, as if she would clear away some confusing impression. There was something in the bearing of this creature indeed which formerly she had not been acquainted with, and it wrung from her an unwilling sympathy.

"Again I ask, what is it you want with me?"

Felicitas smiled faintly. "Won't you let me sit down? It has cost me something to come here."

And it was true enough that she was ready to drop. But she waited for Johanna's gesture of consent before she sank into the chair against which she had been leaning for so long. Her eyes closed, and she drew a deep breath. Then she began to talk in a subdued tone.

"It is like being in a dream, Johanna. I can hardly believe that to-day I shall attain that peace of mind after which I have been groping for years. Believe me when I say that I haven't once had any real joy in what is mine. Your image has stood between

us. . . . It has seemed to me as if I had got everything by stealth. . . ."

"And so you have," Johanna broke in harshly.

"Yes; as if I had robbed some one worthier of the position. You see that, so long as I live at his side, I carry about with me the thought that my fate is in your hands. And now I feel that what you resolved to do would be my salvation. But what have I not had to endure before I reached this point?" And, as if shuddering at the thought of the past, she cowered back in the chair.

Johanna had regained her self-possession. How well she knew these languishing glances, these veiled flute-like tones. Her eyes, sharpened by hate, saw through all the pretty wiles and artifices as through a glass case. Her gaze rested unmercifully on the cowering one, and only waited for her to reveal her hand, then woe to her.

Felicitas suspected all this. The lean sister of charity with the lofty bosom—Felicitas thought it must be padded with virtue—was more difficult to deal with than her brother, the dear, overgrown schoolboy.

But even she had her weak spot; even she! And with folded hands and softly breathed words, Felicitas went on with the history of her suffering and struggles. It was very much the same as what she had confided to Leo on the Isle of Friendship, only a little altered to suit the special case. A blend of self-accusation and self-justification, of declarations of ardent attachment to her husband and outbreaks of torturing fear of him; a tossing between consciousness of unworthiness and the impulse to lose this consciousness in new unworthy acts—all this poured out in a stream of humility and penitence, radiated by the magic reflection of a soul hungry for beauty and love.

How much she believed of it herself she scarcely knew. In her easily impressionable mind, which she could play with as one plays with a spoilt child, truth changed into lies and lies into truth as the emergency required. Now she had reached in her story the first meeting with Leo. She halted, for she had not had time to consider, in the excitement of the moment, which of the three motives she should make use of—that suggested by the world, that which made out it had been done for Ulrich's sake, or that which was really the true one.

"Be large-minded; be noble, and not petty," a voice said within her. And she told the truth. Of course it was not the truth by a long way, but only what she took for the truth.

At the mention of the first letter to Leo, Johanna gave a sigh of satisfaction. Then she froze again into her stony aspect, but watched her enemy with ravenous eyes. Felicitas had nearly finished.

"It seems as if it would all be in vain," she concluded, "what I have tried to do for Ulrich's happiness, if I don't succeed in bringing about a reconciliation between our families; that is to say, between you and me."

Johanna laughed shrilly.

"Ulrich must come in and out here," Felicitas said eagerly, "as he used to in old times, without any fears about injuring the honour of his wife. Now, Johanna, you know why I came. This is the 'dangerous game' I am playing. I feel and see that I have lost it, for you only answer me with scoffing laughter. If you laugh again, I shall know there is no further hope."

And then suddenly she fell on her knees, and, seizing Johanna's skirts, cried, sobbing—

"No, don't laugh; don't laugh! Forgive me! Don't let me be ruined. Be my refuge and rock of strength. I am devoured by a longing for absolution. . . . You are pure. . . . A saint. Will you show me the right way—guide and help me to repent? Pray for me, and teach me to pray. Let me come to you when my guilt is driving me to distraction and despair. Let me kneel and weep . . . like this . . . at your feet."

She made an attempt to embrace Johanna's knees, but she who had been looking down on her with hard compressed lips, quickly drew herself away, and, picking up the train of her dress, stepped by her.

"Listen to my answer," she said. "You have laid your scheme very skilfully, that must be admitted; but you are in error if you imagine I don't see through you. You and I understand each other, Felicitas; there can be no fencing between us. I take very little interest in you now. I say of you what the Apostle Paul said of the heathen—'What are they to me that I should judge them?' What are you to me that I should condemn or forgive you? You must make your own reckoning with what you call life. But if you think that I shall quietly stand by and look on while you draw my brother into your toils for a second time, and ruin him body and soul——"

"Oh, Jesus!" cried Felicitas. However much she might have planned and rehearsed this interview, that bitter cry from the depths of her tormented soul had not been in the programme.

Even Johanna seemed for a moment impressed by it; then she quickly took up again the thread she had dropped.

"Naturally, you deny it. You are an adept at playing the innocent. To be quite open with you, I myself have been instrumental in my brother's approaching you, as a means of putting an end to your insane conduct; for your husband's house must be cleansed at any price. But it was not your place to make the first

advance. For you to do it was shameless, if not something worse. The foundation of your soul is overgrown by rubbish and weeds. But they shall be dug up."

A gleam of secret terror flitted over the unhappy penitent's tear-stained countenance. She rose slowly and threw herself into the armchair.

"This is the reward one gets for speaking the truth," she thought. "I might just as well have used the Ulrich pretext, and the rest would have been simple." Was she now to throw up the game as lost? No, not yet. She felt that the highest trump of all was up her sleeve. But she wasn't quite sure how to play it. So, like one who was at the last gasp and resigned, she said—

"Very well, send for him. I am ready."

Johanna fixed her eyes on her piercingly, as if she expected a new trick. Then she caught hold of the bell-rope, but let it fall again.

"You still think that I am in joke?" she asked; while Felicitas, apparently calm, followed every movement of her hands with a pained smile.

"I think that you are bent on ruining me," she replied; "and that is enough."

"Why should I wish to do that?"

"Because you hate me, Johanna."

Johanna came nearer to her, and in a voice which seemed nearly to choke her, she hissed in her ear—

"I will be honest. Yes, I hate you, I never hated my husband as much as I hate you. But that is not here or there. It has nothing to do with the matter in hand. As far as I am concerned, you might lead as pleasure-loving and sinful a life as you pleased. I shouldn't care. But you have laid hands on those who are dear to me. I could tear my own eyes out over it. Why should I spare you?"

"This is the right moment," thought Felicitas. And pressing her hand to her beating heart, she said, with the same martyr-like air—

"If that is the reason, Johanna, you and I are quits after all."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see that to-day you yourself are laying hands on some one dear to you?"

Johanna shrank back a little, her eyes opened wide with a fixed expression, as if she beheld in front of her this approaching evil. And Felicitas continued—

"Don't you see that it will hurt *him*? Aren't you afraid that it may kill him? But you are strong, and you are so great, Johanna, that you would rather he died than remained the possession of one unworthy of him. All I say is, that you ought to have done sooner

what you intend to do to-day. It should have been done before habit had made him used to the new conditions. I speak of 'habit' because I daren't mention love in your presence."

Johanna spread her trembling hands on the table, and Felicitas continued in a still humbler and more resigned tone.

"Perhaps my imagination paints things too black. Perhaps he may recover from the blow which is to be dealt him . . . for it lies with you, Johanna, to repair this day's work and to help him to forget it."

Johanna started up. Her eyes pierced the face of her opponent anxiously.

"What are you trying to convey to me?" she stammered.

Felicitas went on, with her plaintive smile. "I only know this, Johanna, that I—I shall not recover from it. Whether he shoots me, whether I throw myself into the river, I don't care. Perhaps neither will happen. He is so kind and noble . . . and I—I am so afraid of death. Maybe I shall perish in shame and misery somewhere, for I am rudderless, Johanna. I count for nothing. In any case, I shall be cleared out of the way; from henceforth I shall be as good as dead; as you said, Johanna, there can be no fencing between us, least of all to-day. Why, then, conceal anything?" She opened her arms. "We love him, both of us, I as much as you . . . this is the ground of our hate."

Johanna cried aloud. She made a motion with her fingers as if she would spring on the defenceless woman, then collapsed on to the sofa and buried her face in the cushions.

Felicitas licked her lips with the point of her little red tongue, which was a habit she had. She was quite sure now that the bell-rope would be left untouched. She came closer to the prostrate form, and was going to lay her hand on her shoulder, when she recollected herself and cautiously withdrew a few steps.

"The only thing we have to consider," she began anew, "is his happiness. If you are certain, Johanna, that you can secure it better than I can, I will yield to you willingly. And even if I did not wish, I am bound to do so because I am in your power. But I am weary of all this anxiety and unrest, and I do it of my own free will. And now, you see, there is really no reason why we should hate each other any more. It might be possible that together we may hit on a way which will spare him the worst pain, for don't forget that when he loses me he loses his friend at the same time, whom he values more highly than anything on earth."

Johanna raised herself and cast her wildly rolling eyes up at the crucifix which, with its white arms, shone out of the twilight.

"Oh, my Saviour," she moaned, "how could I want to do it? How couldst Thou permit that I should want to do it?"

"Don't distress yourself," Felicitas went on, and now she really did lay her hand on the heaving shoulder. "Nothing has actually happened yet, and therefore I will make another proposal to you. To-morrow I will leave his house and write to him from Münsterberg. 'Forgive me. I see that I can't make you happy. You have made a mistake. I set you free. Choose the woman who is worthy of you."

At this Johanna turned round abruptly, clung to her, and seemed as if she would have drawn her head down to hers and kissed her. But the moment she felt the cool, soft arms of the woman she had so long hated touch her throat, she tore herself away shuddering and rushed to the window, to put as much distance as possible between her and the fair, smiling sinner; from this coign of vantage she began speaking.

"I have allowed myself to be cajoled by you, Felicitas. I am now as defenceless as yourself. You say that I love—aye, I love him. Triumph over me, then, for you have him, and I can do nothing but pray for him. But what do you know of how I love him? I might as well say to you I don't love him, and in your sense it wouldn't be a lie. My love is spiritual, and partakes of worship. I want nothing further from him. To worship him is the same to me as belonging to him. I love him as I love the risen Lord, the saint who will one day kneel with me before God's throne. But what do you understand of love like this? You all jeer at me. No, but you don't despise me. You have a slight inkling into what I feel, and you envy me. But, nevertheless, you have no idea of what it is—of what it is at night to see the Gates of Heaven open, and the glory of God flame down, and the white wounds of the Saviour begin to bleed. Such a miracle has happened here more than once."

And she contemplated the crucifix hanging over the praying-stool with great hungry eyes.

Felicitas cringed. She had begun to be afraid. It seemed to be true what people said, that Johanna's fanaticism had driven her out of her mind. When the latter saw her shiver, she broke into a laugh.

"You are frightened," she said. "I can well believe it. . . . No lies, no mask have any avail with the naked, bleeding One. . . . Come, give me your hand."

The imperious command met with no resistance. Felicitas, half-fearful, half-curious, drew nearer and felt her hand seized by one as if in fever.

"Why do you tremble?" asked Johanna. "You ought to be glad, for now I am in your power, as much as you are in mine. You are afraid to meet the eyes of the Crucified, but look well. Do you know who has eyes like those?"

"No," said Felicitas.

"And you pretend to love him! Oh, you dissembler! Now, listen, either your mind is pure and clear as gold, like the blood that flows from those wounds, and I have been deceived in you; or it is an abysmal sink of iniquity beyond my capacity to measure in this life."

"The truth is about halfway between the two," thought Felicitas.

"But we will leave that. If you desire that our enmity shall be over from this hour, you will not refuse to take the oath I require of you."

"It won't be so awful," thought Felicitas, and with downcast eyes she replied—

"I am not afraid of any oath."

"Then kneel down."

"Why, where?" asked Felicitas, nervously.

"Here, on my stool."

"Very well, even that I will do," said Felicitas, and knelt as she was bidden, carefully drawing aside her festive skirts as she did so.

"Place your hands on the Saviour's feet."

Felicitas dared not refuse. When the tips of her fingers came in contact with the cold marble, she cowered and shivered. She felt as if an icy stream ran over her from those white feet, which threatened to freeze the blood in her veins, but she held out bravely. And then in a low, slightly tremulous voice, she repeated the words Johanna dictated to her, like a confirmation candidate kneeling in white muslin at the altar, stammering forth her confession of faith.

"I swear to Thee, merciful Lord, I confess and protest in Thy name, that I am filled with penitence for my sin, and shall be penitent till my life's end."

"If nothing further occurs," she thought meanwhile.

"I will cherish no other thought, no other wish than to repent what has happened. Ulrich's happiness and honour shall be my expiation, and my only object in life till he dies."

"Amen," added Felicitas, with a sigh of relief, and was going to get up hastily, but Johanna held her down on the stool.

"We haven't done yet," she said, and laughed between her clenched teeth.

Felicitas thought, "I don't care," and prepared herself to repeat further what was poured into her ear in broken whispers mingled with hot gasping waves of breath.

"If my heart is not pure, if I take this oath, as a blind. . . ."

Felicitas hesitated a little to test herself. . . . No it was no blind. She really meant what she was promising.

"If in future I set my desires on vain pleasure, or nourish sinful wishes, so shalt Thou punish me through the dearest I possess. Thou shalt shame me in the sight of all men."

"Thou shalt shame me in the sight of all men," repeated Felicitas, and looked timidly round her.

"The child Thou hast given me shall die," was whispered in her ear.

A cold shiver ran along her spine, and then she repeated even this.

"And I shall be his murderess."

Felicitas was silent and trembled.

"Well . . . why do you hesitate?"

"Johanna, it is so awful, what you want me to say."

"It is, but only thus can I be sure of you. Say it or not. You have your choice."

"And . . . I . . . shall . . . be . . . his . . . murderess."

"Right, now say Amen."

"Amen."

Then she sank with her forehead on the edge of the desk. She glanced at her fingers, which had relaxed their grasp on the feet of the Crucified, as if she expected there must be traces on them of the blood which Johanna saw streaming from the wounds. It seemed to her as if she had sworn away her life, as if with those last words the sun had gone down, never to rise again.

Then she slowly raised herself. The next moment, she felt Johanna's arms round her, and the feverish lips, struggling against repulsion pressed to her own.

She returned the pressure mechanically, thinking with a shudder—

"And this too is a kiss."

Johanna seized her hand. "Now you can return to your place which you have occupied as undisputed mistress till to-day," said she. "You also shall have your way, and may count me your friend from henceforth; and now, let us go over to them. Ulrich must know that we are reconciled."

"And Leo too," thought Felicitas, smoothing out the folds of her dress which were crumpled from kneeling.

As she walked into the open air by Johanna's side and saw the sun shining, in spite of all that had happened, greenish-gold through the leaves, she took comfort for the first time. The new position of affairs seemed already more familiar.

"The oath may do good," she said to herself. "It will, at least keep me from doing silly things."

Frau von Sellenthin and Ulrich Kletzingk sat together on the terrace, keeping up a somewhat constrained conversation, because both were awaiting, full of impatience, Lizzie's return. A mounted messenger had been sent out to the fields to summon Leo home. Elly, irradiating placid rosy innocence, stitched at her embroidery,

which was spread out on her knees; while Hertha, with idle fingers, was on the *qui vive* for coming events. Even the presence of Ulrich, to whom she had felt drawn long ago in the bonds of a glowing friendship, could not dissipate the panic which the mysterious meeting between the two women had awakened in her. She was the first to become aware of their approach. Walking close to each other, they loomed against the background of the park—the one in her black, flapping weeds resembling a gliding shadow, and the other like a white summer cloudlet.

Now grandmamma saw them coming.

"Thank God!" she murmured, rolling up her crochet, and giving Ulrich a sign to look round.

"Thank God," he repeated, as he kissed the old lady's hand. "Now at last we are at peace."

Every one had got up and looked towards the two women as they ascended the steps of the terrace.

"Well, I don't think it seems altogether like peace," thought Hertha, observing the expression of bitter chagrin which made her mother's features appear more severe and sour than ever before. Her eyes were searching Ulrich's face. "She looks at him as if she would like to swallow him," thought Hertha.

And then she came under the spell of Felicitas's charms, which held her close captive.

"Oh, how very beautiful she is!" she said to herself with a sigh. "How I should love to be like her."

Greetings were exchanged, and half-murmured, significant words spoken; but Hertha heard nothing, being completely fascinated by the fair stranger whose smile was so melancholy, and who knew how to bow her head with such gentle grace.

She had a dim sensation as if hearing music—low, dreamy, strange music, which grew stronger directly the beautiful woman made a movement, and died softly when she sat motionless and silent.

When she kissed her husband, Hertha envied him; and when she greeted Elly in a friendly manner, Hertha felt herself alone and deserted. But then the fair creature turned to her and gave her an astonished yet exquisite smile. Hertha glowed to the roots of her hair.

"This is, then, Countess Hertha, of whom I have often heard?" asked Frau Felicitas.

"Whom has she heard of me from?" wondered Hertha, without daring to lift her eyes.

And now she beheld a rounded, snow-white hand stretched invitingly out to her. She would like to have rushed at it, to have kissed it; but in her awkwardness she could only lay three fingers in it uncertainly, and then quickly withdraw them.

"You are like a fairy princess, Countess Hertha," she heard the stranger's sweet, soft voice breathe close to her—"so tall and so proud. We must be friends."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hertha, glowing with gratitude for so much kindness, and what was more, the beautiful woman threw her arms round her and kissed her on the lips. Then something happened which she could not have explained. At the moment the stranger's lips touched hers, she was seized anew with the same uncanny feeling which her stepmother's exclamation had awakened in her a few hours earlier. As if turned to stone, she allowed herself to be kissed, and gasped, for the deadening perfume which this embrace exhaled streamed over her and almost took her breath away.

Then she heard grandmamma say, "She is still shy . . . she hasn't seen much society yet." Dear, dear grandmamma, and she nearly crushed the old, protecting hand, that so kindly guided her stumbling destiny. Now every one sat down on the terrace, and tea was served. It was long past the vesper hour. Hertha sat in a dream, and eat and drank absently as if she hadn't broken her fast for days.

Her attention was first caught again by overhearing bits of the conversation which passed between her stepmother and the Baron Kletzingk.

There was nothing remarkable about the conversation itself, for it turned on the pedagogic principles which governed Ulrich's education of the village children. Only the tone in which it was conducted was extraordinary.

There was something like suppressed scorn in her stepmother's indifferent words, one moment she seemed as if she would like to cry, the next she would collapse into brooding reflection, and her eyes would be fixed on his face, full of stony pain. He, on his side, talked to her as if she were an invalid who was to be humoured. He did not contradict her, but modified at once anything that seemed to displease her . . . and when she threw in a derogatory or incredulous remark with her nervously trembling lips, he pretended that he heartily shared her opinion, saying that her reasons were important enough to make him change his mind. But after such a concession he got hardly more than a shrug of her shoulders for answer.

"What can he have done to her that she hates him so," thought Hertha; and then her attention wandered again to Felicitas, at whom she stared admiringly.

In the middle of the flagging conversation a firm footstep was heard in the breakfast-room, accompanied by the pattering of the St. Bernard's feet. Whoever was speaking broke off before finishing his or her sentence.

Every one sat upright and glanced expectantly at the door.

Hertha felt her heart beating quickly. For an instant her eyes met those of the beautiful woman, and it seemed to her that the pale face had grown a shade paler.

The door was flung back, and Leo burst on to the terrace. Suddenly he paused and drew back. His hand fidgeted with the ends of his beard, his eyes fastened on Felicitas with a searching, threatening gaze.

"He doesn't like her," was Hertha's inward comment.

Ulrich went up to him quickly, and seized his hand. "What you see here, old man, means reconciliation. Now we are all going to enjoy ourselves together at last."

"You two?" asked Leo, indicating with his finger the two women.

"Yes, certainly, we are reconciled," responded Johanna, with her bitterest smile. He was going to say more, when Ulrich admonished him. "Think of the children," he said.

"It is to be hoped now that you will not disdain to shake hands with me, sister," Leo said.

"I have come here expressly with that purpose," answered Johanna, rising.

Their hands touched, and they looked into each other's eyes. To him her hand said, "I hold you in its hollow," and her glance, "Be careful."

Then he turned to greet Felicitas with a fleeting smile.

"I wonder why he doesn't like her?" Hertha asked herself, rather puzzled at everything.

XX

IT was late in the evening of the following day. Hertha, already half undressed, stood at the bedroom window and looked at the moon. Her breast heaved under its burden of woe. She had just written to her best friend, Ada—Ada von Wehrheimb—with whom, since they were at school together, she had been supposed to share every joy and sorrow. The letter, with two postscripts, lay on the table.

At last she had had the courage to tell her friend of the utter wreck of all her hopes, and, having once written her woes, she realized, as she had not done before, their full extent, for till now a vague mistrust of herself had prevented her taking her own suffering altogether seriously. And when one wanted to feel thoroughly unhappy, there were so many little things to interrupt one—the cocks and hens, the foals, the saddle-horses, the swing, Elly's silly chatter, archery, and, last but not least, grandmamma and her cookery-book. On the other hand, friends and nourishers of the unhappy mood were "Poetic Greetings" by Elise Polkos, Leo the dog, embroidery, and, above all, the moon.

Slowly it sailed, now, above the rustling treetops. The true September moon — big, white and cold, with sharply defined shadows visible in its brilliant orb. It swept the grey clouds which seemed to disperse like silver dust, so soon as it touched them, leaving only a faint mist behind on the smooth floor of the sky.

The garden-lawns lay brightly illumined in the moonbeams. A swarm of silvery sparks chased each other over the carp pond directly the breeze ruffled its waters. It was like a shower of hoar-frost skimming a white body. In the middle of the flashing circle of light rose the obelisk—a clumsy pile of blackness with sharp-cut corners. On one side it seemed to project a little as if a round piece had been added on to it there, and within this arch something dark-red was glowing like a fiery eye.

Hertha looked at it again. She thought she must be mistaken; but the fiery eye did not disappear. It winked at her roguishly and pryingly as much as to say, "I know you. You and your stupid love-lorn heart!"

This heart began to beat louder. What could it be at this time of night making fireworks in the deserted sleeping garden? "If you had an atom of pluck you would go at once and find out."

When Hertha's will called her courage in question, she was sure to act. So she flung a grey waterproof over her shoulders, threw an inquiring glance at Elly, who, with slightly pouting rosy lips, slept the most profound sleep, and in her slippered feet slid out into the corridor, where the moonlit window-panes cast a galaxy of bright shapes on the long wall.

Now she began to be afraid in earnest, but it was not far to the wicket. The latch clicked, and, breathing quickly, she entered the garden, the damp dew-laden grass of which struck icy cold through her thin stockings. All the time the fiery eye still gleamed across at her. For a moment it seemed as if a lid had dropped over it, but then it appeared again in a somewhat darker corner. One instant she almost decided to turn round, but the next she was ashamed of her cowardice and began to hurry straight towards the suspicious object, at the top of her speed. Then suddenly a dog barked, and a voice that made her heart stand still, cried—

"Who is there?"

She was so terrified that she could neither speak nor move a step backwards or forwards. As if glued to the spot, she stood there till Leo, the dog, with a friendly whine, pressed his damp nose into the palm of her hand.

"Who the devil is there?" the voice called out once more, and then *his* figure rose up like that of a huge Hun and began to stride towards the tree that she crouched behind.

"It's only me," she gasped chokingly.

"Child, you! Why aren't you in bed?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"And so are running about out-of-doors late at night. Grandmamma ought to know this."

He had caught hold of her hand, which in vain struggled to get free. The short pipe in his mouth emitted clouds of white smoke around her. Its glowing bowl had been the fiery eye which had blinked at her so suspiciously.

"You are out yourself," she answered, biting her lips till her teeth ground together.

"That is a different thing. I am a robust fellow who can stand all weathers."

"So can I."

"Now, now."

"And if I can't, what does it matter? Nothing could be worse than my life is at present."

He made a sound of pity with his tongue. "Child, child," he said, "are we beating our wings again?"

"Oh, go away — leave me alone." And she warded him off with her elbows; she was not far from sobbing.

"Don't begin the old game, Hertha; I haven't done anything to you for a long time."

"No, that's true," she replied, "you haven't done anything to me, nothing at all either bad or good."

He stroked his beard meditatively. "As we are here, child, and it seems that we both can't sleep, come and sit down. Sit down beside me; we may find lots to talk about."

She felt dimly, "Now I must defend myself." But how could she resist? Already he had seized her by the shoulder and drawn her to the steps of the obelisk, where he had been sitting before.

"What am I to do here?" she asked, cowering down.

"Be sincere, out with it. You are not happy, my child?"

She shrugged her shoulders twice. "Not even *now!*" she said.

He suppressed a smile. "Come, confess. . . . What ails you? We have all remarked on the change in you. Grandmamma is beginning to worry about it. If you are fond of her, you will be sorry for that, eh?"

She shook her head, struggling with her tears. "I want to be fond of everybody—everybody."

"Yes, and don't you see we are all anxious that you should be happy? Don't you understand *that*, you obstinate one?"

"Don't, you only try to hurt me." And she thrust her elbows at him.

"I?" he asked. "Good Heavens! how?"

"You will speak to me always as if I were a child."

"And that hurts you?"

She was silent. Now was the time to tell him all that was in her heart. The hour of reckoning had come.

But she felt as if her lips had been sealed. There was a whirling and rushing in her head. She felt a sensation as of a douche of water falling from her crown over her limbs, and with a soft sigh she sank against the stone. He was afraid that faintness had attacked her; and supporting her with his left arm he bent his head down to hers. The moon lit up one half of her face, while of the other only the contour of the oval cheek showed faintly against the darkness.

"Be reasonable, sweet child," he begged.

She did not move, and he could contemplate her at his leisure. Here and there in the dusky masses of her loose hair shone a high light like a glowworm, and a few dark strands waved in spiral form over the high smooth forehead. A line of care which he had not noticed before hovered at the corners of her softly curved mouth.

Taken altogether, it was no longer the face of a child that lay there shining white in the moonlight; and, clearer than weeks before after the meeting at the inn, there awoke in his heart the self-reproach, "Here is the happiness which you will pass lightly by."

The dreamy sunny premonition, "It will be," dared no more arise out of his soul's depths. What *had been*, held him in fetters. The past, of which he had delusively believed himself to be master long ago, ever stretched its spectre-like form in front of him with more threatening mien. It filled him at every pore with a dull repellant anguish.

Not for nothing had he come at midnight to set out here and brood over emotions, which would not exist if one tried to define them with names, but which suddenly overwhelm a man when he thinks that he is safest from them. Not for nothing had he foregone sleep, he who at daybreak must be up and at his work.

His heart went out in a tenderness that was half pain, to this naïve immature being leaning against his arm, full of the unconscious cravings of youth. It seemed to him that in helping her he must help himself. He stroked her cheek with an unsteady hand.

"Come now, be good, sweet child," he said in a comforting tone. "Speak . . . unburden your heart."

She sighed heavily and turned her little head slightly towards his shoulder as if she would like to nestle there.

"Just the same as she was then," he thought—"shy and defiant, but completely melted by kindness."

She was still silent.

"Look here," he said, "I live under the same roof with you, but of your life, of your past, I know absolutely nothing."

"You have never asked me about it," she replied.

"Would you have told me if I had?"

"Of course I would. . . . I will tell you now, this minute, if you like."

She disengaged herself from his arm; an eager blissful smile lit up her face.

"Of course I should like it. So fire away."

The expression, "fire away," did not please her. It seemed scarcely suitable to the solemnity of the occasion, but his interest so delighted her that she quickly forgot the jarring note.

"God knows," she said, "there isn't much to tell, after all. So far I haven't had many experiences, and what I have had are mostly stupid."

"Do you remember your mother?" he interposed, to give her an opening.

She cast her eyes up at the stars. "Yes, thank God!" she said. "I was nearly seven years old when she died. Ah! how I cried. . . .

We lived in a big castle, amidst pure Poles: The castle was on a hill, and it had a colonnade leading down to the Weichsel, which was at the foot of the hill. She used to sit in the colonnade when it was warm, and the maids with red handkerchiefs on their heads carried shawls for her. And every minute she would say, '*Mnie jest zimno*,' which means, 'I am cold,' and then they used to put another shawl over her. The long rafts glided by on the river below, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays the steamboat came. She always watched the steamboat till it was out of sight and not a puff of its smoke to be seen, and when it had quite disappeared she used to say, '*Podniescie mnie*,' and that meant, 'Lift me up.' She wanted to see if she could catch another glimpse of it, standing up. She had brown hair and a face like wax, with very big dark eyes. There were always drops of perspiration on her cheeks. She was not tall, but rather small, and she had thin arms; but that came from illness and from grief, and perhaps from ennui. For she said constantly, 'I am very unhappy, and dreadfully dull.'"

"And your father—where was he?" Leo asked.

Her face hardened into an expression of hate.

"I would rather not speak of my father," she answered; "he was bad. . . . Yes, he was bad, and I shall be bad too, for I am like him."

"Good gracious!" he remonstrated; "who put that nonsense into your head?"

"It isn't nonsense," she replied, full of conviction; "have you never heard of Darwin?"

"Yes . . . the man who says we are descended from monkeys and such-like—rot!" he was going to add, but checked himself in time.

"And then there is heredity, you know, about our all inheriting the qualities of our parents. Our science-master explained that to us. If your father is given to drink, then you will drink too."

"Did your father drink?"

"Yes—he drank."

"And so you are afraid that you will become a drunkard, eh?"

"No, not that. A girl couldn't very well. But I am afraid about temper."

"What temper?"

"His was so violent. When he was in one of his rages he didn't know what he was doing; once he flew at me with a knife."

"Horrors! How old were you then?"

"Not quite eight. It was after mother's death. He came from I don't know where. We hadn't seen him for two years, and when he found out that nothing had been left to him, and that it was all mine, and had already been put in the hands of trustees, he was

frantic, and it was then that he did it—snatched up the knife. Afterwards he took me with him when he travelled about. I was always to be with him, because then he could get the money for my education."

"And you understood everything even then?" he exclaimed, amazed and deeply moved.

A melancholy little smile flitted across her face, which made her look years older.

"You see, I am not so foolish as you thought," she said. "I have cried a good deal in my life. Oh yes! We were speaking of the violent temper. . . . Well, I have got it too. If I am angry I am blind, and don't know what I do, and my blood rushes into my head. I shall come to a bad end one day. Mamma says I ought to pray, and beseech the Lord Jesus every day to change my bad blood. But I am not sure that it would be right. For if I have my bad times, I have my good too. No one dreams what they are. Elly, for example. You know what she is like? always placid, always soft. I believe the sun shines brighter for me than for her, that to my eyes green is greener, and . . . the moon . . . how it sails up there. . . . She doesn't see it. . . . She is always too sleepy. So I say to myself often, every unhappiness may be happiness if one knows just how to enjoy things like that."

He laid his hands on his forehead and stared at her. "Great God!" he thought, "what magic there is in a young creature like this!"

She had talked herself into a high pitch of excitement, and, without heeding him, went on—

"Yes, and then he left me at Geneva and went to get married, and that is how you and I come to be related, you see. And when I heard that I had a new mother I wept for joy; but the others —the girls, you know—frightened me, and said, 'What will become of you now you have got *une marâtre*!' for there we all talked French. But I thought to myself, 'Wait till she sees you; she will sure to be kind out of pity.' And because Madame Guignaud wished me to pay my respects to her beforehand, I wrote her a letter. But there was not much respect in it, and it began like this: 'Ma mère voici une malheureuse enfant qui vous implore'—and so on. However, it did very well, and when she came she was good and loving to me, and my heart leapt out to her. Ah! in those days she often smiled. She seemed to love my father very much, and I hoped better days were now in store for me, and I should stay at home, but, properly speaking, there was no home. He refused to stay on the estate my dead mamma had left to him, for he said that he was ashamed to be 'mademoiselle's guest.' He meant me by 'mademoiselle.' His own estate, Malkischken, as you know, was so

dilapidated that we had to get the furniture for three rooms on hire from a carpenter in Münsterberg. That's why we didn't stay long there, but started travelling about. We went to Baden-Baden, Spa, Nice; and everywhere it was the same, the same waiters and electric-bells, every morning two eggs with coffee, and at dinner twelve courses; but if one was hungry in between, one had to starve, because we were charged *en pension*. Mamma was always sad, and papa always angry with me, and in want of money. Oh! it was terrible. One day he flew at me with his riding-whip, and was going to beat me, when mamma sprang between us and said, 'The child shall go away to-day, or——' What the 'or' meant I didn't understand, but he grew as white as a sheet, and the next morning I went away, first back to Geneva, where I stayed till I was thirteen. That is where Ada was——"

She stopped, thinking with a start of the letter she had left unblotted on the writing-table.

"Which Ada?"

"Ada von Wehrheimb, my greatest friend," she replied; and, turning her head aside, she added with a slight blush, "She is engaged already."

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, "quickly fixed up. Well, and then?"

"Then . . . then." She lost the thread of her narrative for a moment. His laugh had put her out.

"Oh, then I went to Hamburg to Frau Lüttgen's, whom we knew in Wiesbaden. Frau Lüttgen's *pensionat* is the most noted *pensionat* in all Hamburg. Oh, what happy times I had there! . . . Frau Lüttgen was as tall and straight as a beanstalk, and was very particular about the pronunciation of *s*. She 's-tärb auf der S-telle weun man vor dem S-piegel s-tand, oder mit einer S-tecknadel s-pieltë oder eine S-peise bes-pöttelte.' Oh, it was too lovely. And there I was confirmed, for I was to be a Protestant, although dear dead mamma was a Catholic. And I was quite willing to change, for we all reverenced the Pastor Bergmann. And when I was kneeling at the altar, I prayed to God with all my heart to take me, so that I might go to heaven at once. For at that time I was quite pious and good, and did not know how bad people could be and how bad I was to be myself."

"And you learnt all that afterwards?" he asked, smirking.

"Rather!"

And she gave a little snort, which was always a sign that she was thinking of her faithless friends Käthi Greiffenstein and Daisy Bellepool.

"Go on, my chick," he begged; "let's have the whole awful history."

"No, but I simply *can't* tell you."

"Why not?"

"Oh, dear, dear! If I do, your are sure to despise me."

"That I certainly shall not do, child."

"Well, one day you must know, so here goes. . . . Once, once, I was in love."

"Indeed?"

"Now you despise me, don't you? Say 'Yes,' say 'Yes' quite calmly. It doesn't matter."

"Who was it?"

"I'll tell you. We ought to have the courage of our sins, even if it costs us our head, oughtn't we? He was a commissionaire in a music-shop."

"Great Scot!"

"Dreadful, wasn't it? He had long fair curly hair—very long. And when we went for walks of an afternoon, Frau Lüttgen in front, he used to stand at the door and make eyes at me. And I always got red, like the donkey I was."

"Now listen, child, and I'll give you some good counsel," he said, laughing. "Not only must we have the courage of our sins, as you so wisely remarked just now, but we must do penance for them."

"You mean. . . because I said. . . . But first hear how he behaved. I had two friends, called Käthi Greiffenstein and Daisy Bellepool, both Americans, and that is why I hate America."

"The whole country, from top to bottom?"

"Yes, and my heart felt lighter when you had cleared out of it. Well, I made those two girls the confidantes of my secrets, and one day—what do you think happened? Novels were found under Käthi Greiffenstein's mattress: 'The Broken Heart,' 'The Marble Bride,' and 'Hussar's Love,' and I don't know what else. There was an awful row. Frau Lüttgen held a court-martial. Käthi denied everything. She knew nothing about the books. Some one else must have put them in her bed. Another search was made, and behold in Daisy Bellepool's bed the same discovery! But besides the books there was a packet of letters too—love-letters. To whom? Why, to me, signed Bruno Steifel. . . . Of course I didn't know any one called Bruno Steifel, but who believed me when I said so? Not a soul! The letters were answers to those I was supposed to have written to him, in which I had asked him to get me novels from the lending library, . . . as a knightly service and testimony of his love. Wasn't it awful?"

"Terrible," Leo said, biting his lips.

"I was locked up, and got nothing, for two days but bread and water and slimy lentil soup. I was prayed for every morning and evening, and Laura Below had a dream in which she saw me burning

in hell. The dream was made public at a committee meeting, and I was held up as a warning example. Who knows how long it might have gone on, if I hadn't thought of a means of saving myself?" . . .

"'If you want to know who Herr Bruno Steifel is,' I said, 'why not go to the library the label of which is stamped on the outside cover of the books? . . . They will be certain to know him there. And they did, sure enough. And who do you think it was?"

"He of the fair locks, of course. . . ."

"Of course. And Frau Lüttgen goes at once to his chief and tells him the whole story. Herr Bruno Steifel is called and cross-examined. 'Have you got novels out from the library?' 'Yes,' he says, and gets horribly red. 'Are you in possession of letters?' He won't answer, but the chief threatens him with dismissal, and he produces them. The signature is: 'Your ever loving Hertha von Prachwitz,' but the handwriting is . . . now guess."

"Daisy Bellepool's?"

"No, Käthi Greiffenstein's. Daisy Bellepool's mamma wished her daughter to have more freedom, like other American girls. So she was allowed to go out alone, and in consequence she arranged the whole business. Wasn't it disgusting?"

"Yes, disgusting."

"What do you think I did? I threw a jug of water at Daisy's head, and gave Käthi such a black eye that she was obliged to wear bandages for three days. So bad can you be when people behave badly to you."

"And what became of the pair?" he asked.

"Käthi was expelled soon after, but Daisy was allowed to stay on because her mamma had subscribed to the new school buildings. But it did her no good. Not any decent girl would speak to her again. What I have lived through. Think of it! Then I came here to Halewitz. Ah, and how I love it! though I have my troubles, even here." She paused and gave him a shy entreating glance, as if she would say, "I know who has only to speak one word to free me from them."

He laughed and stretched himself; and then thought with embarrassment of the other woman who had come into his house to disturb its peace.

"We all have our troubles, my dear," he said.

"You, too?" she asked, lifting her eyes to him in alarm.

"More than enough, my child."

"Yes, yes, I know," she sighed. "Grandmamma is always talking about it."

"About what?"

"About your having more debts than you have hairs on your

head, and that you often don't know on Saturdays where to get money to pay the wages."

"Our dear respected grandmamma is an old chatterbox."

"But it's true, isn't it?"

"Yes, the devil can't deny it."

She was silent and seemed to be considering deeply. Then she inquired, crinkling her forehead—

"For about how much longer can you hold on?"

"Hold on—what do you mean?"

"How long, I mean, before you come a cropper, as the saying is?"

"Ah, now it is evident you were educated at Hamburg," he said, trying to joke.

But she would not be evaded. "Could you hold on, do you think, another four years and four months?"

"Why do you insist on the fours?" he laughed.

She drew down the corners of her mouth. "Now you are making fun of me," she said, "and it is really rather sad. . . . I am *so* rich, and have, so far, too much money."

"Ah! you would like to lend me some?"

"I *can't*, that's the worst of it," she answered; "all through the stupid trusteeship. It is too provoking;" and she scuffled her feet impatiently.

"How much would you be prepared to give me?" he asked, for the subject amused him.

"All."

A stab of melancholy happiness shot through him; that feeling which he had not been able to recapture before. Now he was obliged to suppress it and goad himself into keeping to the comic side of the question. With a hurried laugh, he cried—

"Hullo, little one, no one can call you stingy."

An anxious look was cast at him, which asked plainly, "Don't you understand me?" Then she crouched down and drew herself shivering away from him, while the tears rolled down her cheeks, over her parted lips and clenched teeth.

"If this isn't love," he thought, "my name is not Sellenthin." A wild jocund impulse within him bid him snatch her in his arms, shout the house awake, shout to the whole world, "Here, see this child, this woman-child is—my wife." He knew that it would have been his salvation, but he did not do it. He did not do it because the fist of his giant care was on his throat almost throttling him, so that the breath was dammed up in his broad chest, and his mighty limbs shackled under the oppressive weight.

"Thank you, dear child, thank you," he said hoarsely. "You meant it well, and I shall never forget it of you."

He bent down and kissed the gleaming forehead held up to him so candidly.

"There is still time," cried the wild voice again. . . .

"And now go to bed," he said. "It is getting very late."

She rose silently, and without wishing him "good night," walked away over the glistening gravel path and the darkling lawn to the garden gate.

It seemed to him that she reeled. He would have rushed after her, but he was as one paralysed. Because he was no longer certain of his honour, he feared to lose his sense of shame.

XXI

SEPTEMBER was drawing to its close. Despite the disquieting turn that events had taken, Leo Sellenthin continued to live a fresh, healthy, and active life, without its ever occurring to him to doubt the indestructibility of his high spirit or the intrepidity of his adherence to his own doctrine of right. Not once had he felt the "tragic touch;" only a certain feeling of discomfort had taken up its abode within him. He was like a man who wears an ill-fitting coat, and doesn't know whether it is too wide or too narrow. The naïve self-assurance which had sat like an ornament on him hitherto was gone; he studied and examined himself, found flaws in his nature, and rejoiced in his good points.

Lively, whimsical sallies which once had rippled forth from him carelessly, seemed to him now something wonderful and striking; he enjoyed them while he gave them utterance, and was pleased when they caused laughter. In sharp contrast to this mood were his surly, taciturn fits, when those around did well to keep out of his way.

But sooner or later his original nature broke through the clouds again, if it was only to scoff cynically at the past. He wanted to be healthy and jolly, and he succeeded.

One afternoon, when Leo was in the act of starting to ride over to Uhlenfelde, there arrived in the courtyard, puffing and blowing, the hanging cheeks of his yellowish-brown face covered with sweat, the worthy old pastor Brenckenberg.

He and his son had walked over together, but the latter had considered it advisable to disappear in the direction of the bailiff's quarters, not being sure of his reception at the castle.

A spirit of devilry awoke in Leo at the sight of the old bigot, to whose philippics he had as yet had no opportunity of retaliating, being thus delivered into his hand.

The pastor's visits to his patron and quondam pupil had never been frequent; they had been limited, for the most part, to pastoral calls, when deputations had to be received or clerical matters discussed, but had generally ended by taking the form of solemn drinking bouts; for Leo, whose cellars were stocked with fine wines, delighted to pour his best into the old man's glass, whose connoisseur-

ship failed only from want of practice. That was an accepted and invariable custom, dating from his father's hilarious times; and even the oldest amongst the retainers could not remember a day when their pastor had left the precincts of Halewitz sober.

"Hullo, old fellow!" called Leo, stretching out his hand to him. "How is it we haven't met all this time? Uneasy conscience, eh?"

"A man of God has never an uneasy conscience," replied the pastor, with a grin—"unless he has been drinking water;" and he mopped his shiny face and bacon neck with a red-cotton pocket-handkerchief.

"Wait," thought Leo; "you shall not get off to-day;" and he motioned to the groom to unsaddle the mare again.

As they walked up side by side to the portico, the parson whose corpulent figure swayed from side to side, appeared of more massive and powerful build than his old pupil, although the latter towered half a head over him.

Leo led him into the study, asked him to sit down, and rang for Christian.

"Bring us a bottle of sour cooking Moselle," he commanded.

The old servant gave him an astonished look. "It is not fit to drink even in the kitchen punch-bowl," he took the liberty of murmuring.

"Do what I tell you!"

Christian departed, shaking his head, and Leo settled himself comfortably opposite the pastor.

"Now let us hear all the scandal," he said. "What chimney smokes? Where has a hair been found in the soup?"

"Fritzchen! Fritzchen!" Brenckenberg rebuked him with his broadest smile. "You shouldn't hold up to ridicule the shepherd of your soul."

He had always called him "Fritzchen." Why, no one knew, not even he himself. The pet name had survived the decade during which their relations to each other had so altered. The "you," which was held to be officially correct, yielded to the familiar "thou" when they sat together over their wine. Sometimes Leo gave the signal, but oftenest it was the old man, whose heart overflowed in his cups, who adopted the more endearing form of address at his own peril.

Christian brought the wine with the conscience of a poisoner, and hobbled out again.

The small black eyes of the shepherd of souls sparkled with satisfaction under their fierce bushy brows; he smacked his full lips. The Lord's wrestler had doffed his armour, and wanted to be simply a man, a peace-loving, weak, lusty human being, who next Sunday would have something to repent. The bottles looked respectable

enough, the wine somewhat pale, it was true, as it trickled into the dignified rummers in a watery stream, but that might be deceptive. He breathed hard through his distended nostrils, and thrust out his upper lip.

"Your health, old fellow!"

"Your health, Fritzchen!"

He tasted, started, half-choked, and coughed violently; then, with a countenance expressive of unutterable human grief and disappointment, he put down his glass.

"Nice wine!" remarked Leo, raising his forefinger to command assent.

The pastor, purple from coughing, would have liked to spit it out, but daren't.

"Fritzchen," he said plaintively, "what tricks are you up to now?"

"Isn't my wine to your taste, Herr Pastor?"

"I can't say it is. 'No. By Jove, Fritzchen!"

"I don't understand you, dear pastor. You see that I drink it. Indeed, since I began to repent my past sins I have drunk nothing else. It is what we call the wine of repentance and crucifixion! Pies-Porter. . . . Year '83. . . . An unusually cold and damp year, as you will remember."

"Ah!" exclaimed the pastor, suddenly enlightened.

"Yes, yes, old friend. Do you grasp it now? Since we condemned our Fritz to hell-fire there has been howling and gnashing of teeth at Halewitz. We don't wallow in luxury here, as David did with his Bathshebas. Sour Moselle is our only drink. Your health, old boy."

"Look here, Fritzchen," said the pastor, relapsing, after his shock, into the affectionate "thou," "if the condition of your conscience compels you to drink it, that is your own affair. I don't wish to hinder any one in carrying out their principles; but you must allow me, if you please, to be only an onlooker."

Leo laughed triumphantly in his face, for this was what he expected.

"If I am not mistaken, my dear friend, you once expressed yourself in the following beautiful and touching words: 'Bareheaded will I go, and walk with my naked soles on red-hot bricks.' Yes, you said you would do that for your David, your Fritzchen. But now, when it comes to the point, it seems that you can't even share in his penitence to the extent of drinking a glass of Pies-Porter, year '83, with him."

The old man stroked his cheeks. "You take me for a fool, Fritz," he said; "but . . . you are right." And with a desperate effort he emptied the glass in one draught.

Leo, in the name of all his sins, did the same, and refilled the glasses.

"Now, Fritzchen," the old man began, letting his bulldog glance, half severe, half servile, rest on his squire, "we are not Catholics, and I am not your father confessor. I simply came here to talk over with you the autumn conference, and, with the Lord's permission, to drink a glass of good wine in your company. Instead, you choose to set before me this trash, and to begin talking of that cursed business, which has already caused me enough headaches."

"*You* began it, old man."

"Yes, in the pulpit. That is my damned duty. . . . And if you rascals will carry on such games, then——"

"You must rail and swear. . . ."

"You've had many a clout from me, Fritzchen. . . ."

"And I have kissed the hand that held the rod," he interposed, laughing.

"I thought I had done enough; but if I had known *that* of you . . . ah! ah!"

"You would like to make it good?" mocked Leo.

"If possible . . . with pleasure."

Leo seized his glass. "Health, Master Pastor!"

"Fritzchen, have mercy!"

"I say drink! *Donnerwetter!*"

And again the superb glasses made reproachful music as they met at being turned to such abominable uses.

Leo uncorked the second bottle, and offered the pastor a cigar.

"I beg pardon, Fritzchen, but are these also—so to say—penitence cigars?"

"What a pity!" thought Leo. "I didn't think of that;" and he shook his head, smiling.

The pastor kindled the excellent weed forthwith, and revelled in the fragrant clouds.

"There you sit, stretching your legs in your splendour," said he, "and split with laughter at the old fat fellow you love to make a fool of. But do you imagine that it makes what you have done one hair's breadth better?"

"Humph!" said Leo, curling his moustache.

"You may deluge it with rose-water, but it still stinks."

"Humph!" came a second time from Leo.

"That day in the church I gave you a scorcher, to the best of my ability. And now you resent it. That's not pretty of you, Fritzchen."

"What I resent," replied Leo, "is that, instead of coming to me and having it out fair and straight, you preferred to let a woman lead you by the nose in the matter, and tried, according to her receipt, to

scourge me into creeping to the foot of the cross, howling and whining my penitence. That's not a manly course to take, and I believe that the old God of our fathers Himself wouldn't be pleased at it."

"Do you mean by this woman your sister?"

"Yes, I mean my sister."

"Very well. You must know, Fritzchen, that your sister came to me a couple of years or so before that, and said—— It doesn't matter what she said, except that I tell you it is no subject for joking, and you should lay it to heart that the unhappy story threatened to prove fatal to your sister's peace."

"What do you know about my sister's peace?"

"Simply this. She knew her bit, and I knew mine. So there was no beating about the bush between us. And when I saw that the story preyed on her mind, I administered consolation, as was my duty, and as I could not procure her exactly the solatium that she required . . ."

"You would say the *man* she requires?"

"Quite right. That is what I do mean. Failing that, I directed her to Heaven. Don't laugh in such a godless fashion, Fritzchen. It is my vocation. And what is Heaven there for, unless it is to help us on our way through this vale of tears?"

"But it is not there to turn our brains."

The old man frowned in deep thought, and muttered, "For that purpose it is not there I agree."

There was a silence. Leo, who was no longer in the mood for jesting, called Christian, and ordered a wine that was drinkable.

"God reward you, Fritzchen," said the pastor. "Now, perhaps, a few sensible ideas will dawn in my addled brain."

Christian, eager to repair his master's sins against the clergy, brought up a fiery "Ranenthaler" brand, that hadn't seen the sun for many a long year.

Brenckenberg slowly damped his lips. His little swollen eyes became mere slits, while with a shudder of delight he emptied the glass. Then once more he was gloomy and silent.

"Aren't you satisfied yet?" Leo asked.

"It's a sin and a shame," he answered, "that one should enjoy one's self while talking of such terrible things. But it is the old Adam in us, Fritzchen—the old Adam."

"You are in a hurry to repent," said Leo. "Let your lips dry first, before you curse with them."

The old man pressed his fists to his forehead.

"The fact of the matter is, Fritzchen, I am no priest after God's heart," he said, as the wine began to bedew his inside. "Quite the contrary, my body is a perfect receptacle for the seven deadly sins.

Chambering and wantoning, to use Biblical language, I have outgrown, of course, but gorging and carousing, Fritzchen, and naughty words . . ."

"*A propos*, perhaps you would like a salmon sandwich with your wine," broke in Leo.

"Later . . . Fritzchen . . . later. . . . Our dear Lord and Saviour will have to be patient with me for these things till the end of my days. It's a waste of labour to struggle against nature. When I watch the elders as they slink into the Conference, lisping and mincing with a 'dear brother in Christ' here, and an 'in God's infinite mercy' there; how they cast up their eyes and fold their hands on their stomachs for sheer self-righteousness and humility . . . Fritzchen, it turns my bile. . . . And yet I envy them. To give the lean their due, they live at least according to Scripture. The fat, on the contrary, are mostly sinners, and don't deserve the grace of God.—Amen."

"What do you want to prove by that argument?"

"That our flesh is the stumbling-block; that from time immemorial the flesh has seduced us into sinful acts, and that it is our flesh that must be crucified."

"If the thin are the saints, and the fat the sinners," interposed Leo, laughing, "then a course of baths at Schweringen must be the best moral cleanser."

"Don't be flippant," remonstrated the pastor. "I am one of the fat. I am a sinner. Many a time I feel my flesh begin to ferment for pure sinfulness. On warm summer evenings, or in winter, by the fire with a glass of grog, thousands of little devils prick you under the skin like pins, and from every button-hole a desire or an indulgence winks at you. Yes, yes, Fritzchen, I know what bulk is. There is no mist before my eyes. We have too good a time of it, and then we go the pace and break our legs."

Leo smilingly asked to have the parable expounded.

"What do I mean by it? I mean this. . . . Don't presume to come to me with such excuses as so-called passion, fate, destiny, and all that nonsense. You have had too good a time, and now the devil has got hold of you by the lappet. I am sorry, Fritzchen, but it can't be helped."

"What do you mean by the devil? Who is the devil?"

"The devil, Fritzchen, goeth about like a roaring lion——"

"Yes, yes; you taught me that in my infancy."

"Very well. And you want to know more? Would you like to see . . . see with your own eyes what the devil is like?"

"I should esteem it an honour and pleasure."

"You shall have your wish."

He seized the under pocket of his long voluminous coat, and produced, with puffs and groans, first an apple, then another apple,

then three ears of corn, then an end of wax-candle. . . . "Altar candle," he explained; "a charm against small-pox. Confiscated it yesterday from a lout who stole it from the vestry." Then a reserve pocket-handkerchief, sticky with bread-crumbs, then a taper, and last of all a leather case, about the size of a man's fist, of three-cornered shape. The case he left on the table, while he slowly stuffed the other miscellaneous articles back into his pocket.

"He is in there."

"The devil?"

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"Dear me!"

"Take care. I am going to open it."

The cover snapped back. Something that resembled a cigar-holder, and the greater part of which was wrapped in red wool, came to light.

"Here he is," said the pastor.

"Exactly as I have always supposed him to be," scoffed Leo.

"Shouldn't have credited you with so much acumen," replied the old man with imperturbable calmness, as he untied the strings which fastened the covering, "for of the many thousand shapes he likes to appear in, this is his favourite."

The woollen wrapper fell off, and what actually revealed itself was a cleanly carved meerschaum point in the form of a woman's leg. Above the amber shoe, which served as the mouthpiece, the part which extended to the knee had been smoked as black as ebony, but the rest, through the protection of the wrapper, had preserved its natural yellowish, white tint.

Leo laughed heartily, but the old man maintained his gravity.

"This is the method that I have discovered of hanging the devil up in the chimney," he said; "and I assure you it affords me holy joy when I do it."

He stuck the half-smoked cigar in the holder, and smoked with all the strength of his lungs.

"There's one thing that I don't understand," said Leo, who now tried to enter into the joke in earnest. "If you have got the devil so entirely in your power, why haven't you made him black all over?"

The old man laid his finger on his nose with a worldly-wise air.

"You speak like an ignorant sinner. Think what a poor creature the devil would be if he couldn't get some concessions from me and you! Just as I am hard at it, robbing him of all his power, he understands how to awaken my pity. This is the devil's peculiarity. He attacks us through our soft places. This, you see, was so smooth and fair and white. Well, I simply felt as if I couldn't. So, you see, I entered into a compact with him, which

was just to smoke a stocking on to him, and to leave the rest as it was by wrapping it up in wool. And now do you see, Fritzchen, that is our whole art. We can't render him powerless, but we can put socks on him, and hide the rest." And as carefully as he had taken off the wrappings, he began to adjust them again on the part that was not discoloured.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Leo. "This is symbolism with a vengeance. It reminds me of the second part of 'Faust.'"

"Don't talk of 'Faust' to me, Fritzchen. Goethe lived like an old heathen, and wrote like an old heathen. When he scanned his verse, he played with his five fingers on the piano and wasn't a bit inspired. Francke and Pusckin composed some fine and stirring verse; but they didn't do it in that fashion. And it is to be hoped the time is long passed when Schleiermacher and the whole lot of liberal divines were allowed to quote Goethe in the pulpit, as if he were one of the fathers of the Church. Besides, he was generally wrong. The eternal feminine draws us upwards, he says somewhere. A very fine noble sentiment, but there is another kind of feminine, equally eternal, that drags us down, Fritzchen, till we don't know at last whether there can be another slough for us to sink into. Many have the genius that helps them to get out of it, but many a one sticks fast and the bog closes over him."

Leo felt his blood rise hotly to his cheeks, for the eyes opposite were hurling at him their most ominous darts. He refilled the glasses. The old man gulped down his wine hastily, and the bushy brows began to twitch. It was a sign that he had reached the stage when his original tirades were at their height. The late baron's "round table," at which he had sat as jester, had always greeted this signal with roars of laughter.

Leo expected to find out now his old friend's most private and true opinion of his own position.

"Forget the priest for once," said he, "and speak to your Fritz as one man and sinner speaks to another. What do you think about my guilt, and what do you advise me to do?"

The pastor shot another shower of lightning darts from beneath his shaggy brows. The billows of his chin champed up and down as if he would crack the difficult nut between his ivory grinders.

"Look here, Fritzchen," he began, "on bright days, that is to say on days when this old brain is bright, I imagine myself to be God, or I put myself in His place. I try to understand what passes in His head when He looks down out of heaven on us miserable scum. He made us what we are. I say to myself, 'Why should He punish us for sins which are His work also?' (If you write all this to my consistory, Fritzchen, in spite of your patronage, I shall have to go begging for bread and office, so keep it to yourself,

please.) And just to demonstrate the matter, I go into the fir wood near Wengern and find an ant-hill. I station myself straddle-legged above it—an exalted attitude, Fritzchen—and I imagine that I am God of this ant-heap. Why should it not be so when besides the German Emperor there is a Prince of Schleiz-Greiz-Lobenstein? There under me they crawl and work, quarrel and bite each other dead. I look on and—grin. Underneath they are certainly sinning, but I the Lord God look on and—grin. 'It is all right,' I say to myself, 'because they sin according to method. Otherwise my beautiful ant-heap would go to pieces.' And I say to myself further, 'So the Lord God is amused at the sins of men, because they are nothing more than the evidence of His laws. He wants sin as well as virtue, otherwise He would not have created it.'"

Leo gave a sigh of relief. He had not hoped for such conciliatory views from this hard old fanatic.

But the latter immediately proceeded to add a damping rider. "Don't make merry too soon," said he; "we haven't come to the end yet. *Why* this is so we cannot know, our poor understanding is too feeble. But that good may come of sin, as good comes of virtue, that the sinner as well as the just man shall be answerable to the same laws, He has established His system of salvation. According to it every man is apportioned a certain measure of sin; he may not transgress the limits, or the whole structure would fall in ruins. Therefore God has ordained for him the following circular route: *Sin—repent*—penance—absolution—and afterwards with renewed zest start afresh, as a pure man, sinning again because every one else does. So all is done in order, and each is allowed the amount of sin that he needs to bring his old Adam into harmony with the Christian commandments. In short, sin means life, but sin without repentance is death."

Leo sprang up and began to pace the room with long strides. "And because of this bogey you are stoking the fires of hell for me," he cried.

"The salvation ordinance is no bogey," replied the old man. "That morning your sister came and said to me, 'He is back, light-hearted and gay, while I am crushed to the earth under the weight of his sin. Is that right?' I made answer, 'Certainly not. The fellow must be got hold of somehow. Repentance must be.'"

"You lie!" said Leo, and banged his fist on the table till the glasses danced. "It mustn't be. At least, not in my case. . . . The strong have their own code of morals as well as the weak. . . . Yours is 'sin, repent, sin again;' mine 'sin, don't repent, *do better*.'"

"As if that could ever work!"

"It would have worked. I had planned it all. And after long thought I was quite clear about its being practical. Would it, do

you think, have been no penance to live near my dearest friend as if he did not exist? For that is what I had decided to do. But then you meddled, you and the women, and have hunted me along a crooked path to which I see no end, and from which there is no turning back. Every step forward is a lie; every prospect ahead fills me with new dismay. When I didn't repent, I was glad and strong and full of courage, but now there is some alien germ in my blood that spreads and spreads and is slowly poisoning my whole being. . . . I see it, and yet can't do anything. I shudder to think what may be coming. And this is what you have done with your cursed preaching of penitence."

"Must repent, Fritzchen," drawled the old man, and emptied his glass.

"Then if it must be"—he came behind the old pastor and seized him by the shoulders—"why haven't you let me bear the brunt of my sin alone? Why did you throw me with that woman again? I have sinned more against her than she against me, so I don't reproach her. Why have you kneaded me into such a pulpy condition that when she came and prayed for my society, I had no weapon of resistance left? She had no further part to play in my life, nor I in hers, and yet here I am, coupled, as it were, with her again. Does that belong to the course of repentance that you have prescribed for me?"

"That is the first step, called 'contritio,' or prostration," said the old man, sagely.

"Stop your drivel," roared Leo. "Again I ask you, why you have hounded me and that woman into each other's arms?"

The old man wiped his forehead. His head was beginning to grow heavy.

"Collect your thoughts," demanded Leo. "Wasn't it my sister's idea?"

"Sister—which sister?" was the dreamy answer. Then suddenly waking up he exclaimed, "Yes, you are right—quite right. She was the first to think of it. A brilliant idea; a blessed idea. Then the souls of two people have to be saved, Fritzchen, and that is no trifle."

"Save them, then, by all means; but separately, and each on its own account."

"Ah, you don't understand, Fritzchen. *Similia, similibus* is an old doctrine. Jesus Christ became man in order that he might save men. The sinner can only be saved through the sinner. You cast that soul into the abyss, you alone can lift it out, and yourself with her. Then it is written in Romans, or is it Corinthians, Fritzchen——?"

He emptied his glass, and forgot the passage he was going to

quote. The more difficult he found it to think rationally, the easier seemed the solution of the problem under discussion.

"The matter is quite simple," he said. "As simple as A B C. Either you don't repent, and the devil gets you; or, you repent and the devil leaves you alone. If you can't remember it, I'll write it out for you. Give me some more to drink, Fritzchen. This wine is first-rate. And perhaps now if there's a salmon sandwich going——"

Leo rang and ordered provisions.

Christian, who grasped the situation, respectfully made the announcement that the Herr Kandidat wanted to know when the Herr Pastor would be likely to think of going. He considered that this little ruse was permissible.

"Is your son here, too?" asked Leo, in quickly rising displeasure, for he remembered the song of "The Smiling Stars."

"Yes, he is there, the spark," laughed the old man, radiant with paternal pride. "Tell him he may trundle home alone. I don't want him."

Christian made his obeisance and retired, casting reproachful eyes up to heaven. That even the clergy should drink too much seemed to him a flaw in the divine dispensation of the world.

"That boy is a good-for-nothing!" exclaimed the pastor, enthusiastically. "You can have no conception, Fritzchen, what a good-for-nothing the boy is!"

"Why don't you whip him and send him back to school?" asked Leo.

"You are always ready with your tongue, Fritzchen. But I'll tell you this." He leaned over to Leo, lowering his voice into a mysterious whisper. "You can have no notion what a good-for-nothing he is." Then, running his fingers through his scant, grey locks, he went on with renewed enthusiasm, "He can drink, he has whiskers, and can write verses. Ah, Fritzchen, when he sings his student-songs—oh, the grand old days of youth where are they, tral-la-la?"

"Hush!" admonished Leo, for Christian was bringing in the tea-tray loaded with cold viands, which had been ready waiting in the kitchen for some time.

He vanished directly.

"And the duels, Fritzchen! Fire! ready! and there he stands on the measure, as I used to do when I belonged to the Westphalian. Yes, Fritzchen, this old world is a fair place, and it is worth enjoying yourself in it—that is to say, when you are a full-blooded chap. In the end, of course, the devil fetches us all Look, Fritzchen, this is the wing of a partridge in jelly. . . . Now, that reminds me of a story. I took my scoundrel of a son

once on a visit to Berlin. Pretty town, Fritzchen, only a little too cultivated. As for the preachers and their sermons, no force there; every sentence a piece of cooked veal in raisin sauce. Where, I should like to know, does the Christian scourging come in in such discourses, Fritzchen? Well, I said to my boy Fritz—I mean Kurt—I said let us go and swell it for once. I vegetate amidst the bullocks of Wengern, but before I die I should just like to see and taste the proper thing. . . . Very good. So we went to a restaurant—all gold, and mirrors, and chandeliers, and waiters in tail-coats. One, as we came in, looked so curiously at us that I said to myself, 'What's he staring at?' But he wanted us to order. . . . And Kurt was not behindhand; he *did* order. Fritzchen, there came first oysters and truffles in pastry and sherry, then hare soup, salmon-trout, Bayonne ham, with sauer-kraat in champagne. . . . Fritzchen, mere common, homely sauer-kraat, but in *champagne*. Ha, ha, ha! And—and artichokes, and so on. The fellow with the white cravat and the cursed grin hovered in the background the whole blessed time. So I said to my boy, 'Look out! That's the devil,' and right enough——"

"It was?"

"Yes; it was. For when we got up to go, what do you think the fellow did? He brought a piece of paper with a long list of items on it, and at the foot a total of seventy-eight marks! Do you see, Fritzchen, thus it is with human life? We may be as bad as we like, always convivial, but the devil stands at the door of our grave and presents the bill. That's why we'll—we'll——Huzzah!"

The voice of thunder reverberated through the house.

"For God's sake stop singing," cried Leo, "or you'll completely ruin your reputation with the women-folk."

"I don't care! I don't care! . . . Oh, the women! Ah, if I was you, Fritzchen! In your place I would be unrepentant. I'd just whistle through life in junketing and tra-ra-la. For to you it is all the same. You have gambled away your chances of eternal bliss. The devil will fetch you for certain."

"Children, fools, and drunkards are supposed to speak the truth," thought Leo, "and here is all three rolled into one." Then he inquired, "You don't think there is any deliverance for me?"

"Pshaw! Deliverance!" cried the old man, growing furious. "Deliverance belongs to the dictionary of those philosopher dogs. . . . Schleiermacher, the rascal, would have talked of 'deliverance.' But amongst honest Christians we say 'salvation' and 'forgiveness of sins.' Yes, Fritzchen, but they are not for you. It is all up. Truly one can never tell the infinite depth of Christ's compassion; but if hell really does exist, you belong there. Do you know how I came to this knowledge? It's nearly five years ago, Fritzchen. I'll

tell you how it was, Fritzchen. But it is a terrible secret. You must close the door."

Leo, who was listening with keen attention, reassured him. "Only speak low," said he; "that is the only precaution necessary."

"Very well, then," began the old man, spitting and spluttering as he lowered his voice, and thrusting out his lips like the spout of a steam-kettle. "One evening I sat with my brats, reading the Bible. My wife, however, was out in the kitchen, baking apple turnovers. I remember that quite well. Some one came to the door whom I didn't know, and I asked him with apostolic gentleness, 'Fellow, what do you want with me?' 'You are to come at once and administer the sacrament,' said he. 'Pure cussedness,' thought I. 'Here has a man arranged to die on this day of all others, just because I was going to sit down to something good for supper. The ties of our profession, Fritzchen! But when he let fall the words Fichtkampen and Rhaden——"

Leo sprang up. He felt that he paled.

"I see, my son," triumphed the old man, "that such names fill us with disgust. But I can't help it. Now the affair took another aspect. I forgot my apple turnover. I tore my gown and bands from the pegs, packed the church plate, jumped into the carriage, and was off like the wind. 'Fellow, tell me exactly what has happened,' I asked. He didn't know. All he knew was that the master had been carried into the house, covered with blood, at six o'clock that morning, and now it had come to the last rites. . . . 'When did the doctor arrive, fellow?' 'The doctor was there,' said he. 'What, at six o'clock in the morning?' 'Yes, your reverence.' . . . Fritzchen, that seemed to me suspicious. I get there. House and yard as still as the grave. No one even to open the door to me. At last a servant-girl came. . . . Corridor, parlour, salon—all quiet and empty. . . . 'Does he still live?' 'Yes.' . . . 'What happened?' 'He fought a duel.' . . . 'Ah! indeed.' . . . I enter the bedroom. . . . You know that room, Fritzchen? A lamp hangs there from the ceiling with a blue shade. Fritzchen, a blue shade. Wasn't it blue, Fritzchen? . . . Emptiness here too. . . . 'Where is he, in God's name?' . . . 'There,' some one says. . . . And I hear death-rattles coming from the canopied bed. . . . 'Where is the doctor?' 'They have fetched him away to a confinement. He'll soon be back.' 'And where is the lady of the house?' 'She has shut herself upstairs in the spare room,' says my informant. . . . I draw the curtains aside. . . . There he lies, swimming in blood. . . . The stream flows from his nose and mouth. . . . And he looks at me with eyes glazing, and makes a sign to me to wipe it away, so that he may speak."

"Stop!" groaned Leo.

"Yes. . . . I don't doubt it would suit your ticket if I stopped. Health, Fritzchen!"

"I implore you not to go on."

"I dare say you are right, Fritzchen. It's hardly the subject for a convivial entertainment, eh? How did I hap on it? Through the devil, of course. You see, Fritzchen, that evening when *he* told me the story of you and her, I could hear her running about overhead I cried tears of blood for your soul, Fritzchen. For you were dearer to me than my own flesh and blood. But to-day I can't cry, Fritzchen, because I have drunk too much wine. You must forgive me, Fritzchen."

He tried to raise his fat fingers deprecatingly to Leo, but the great bulldog jowl dropped on his breast with a dull wheezing sound in his throat. He had fallen asleep.

Leo bowed his head in his hands, and stared across at him with burning, starting eyes.

"Thus grimly does the joke end," thought he, "that I permitted myself to play off on my conscience."

He shuddered. He fancied he too saw the glazing eyes of the dying man fixed on him, and heard the rattles in his throat—the man whose last curse had been for him. And the woman who had raved and ramped about in the locked guest-chamber above, who left her husband to die alone and forsaken like a dog, because she dared not approach him with her guilt-stained body. He could almost hear her sobs and whimperings coming through the ceiling. . . . And all that—all was his—*his* doing.

"It will drive me mad!" he cried, jumping to his feet.

He longed for the sound of a human voice, but only the snores of the drunken old man fell on his ear. He would have given anything to have some one to whom he could go to shriek out the torments in his breast; but he had no one—no one but that woman who had sinned with him.

"Now I understand why she clings to me," he thought; "and perhaps soon she will be as necessary to me as I to her."

He remembered the Leo Sellenthin of scarcely four weeks earlier. And he came before him as a complete stranger. What had happened in the meanwhile? He didn't know.

Restlessly, with his folded hands pressed against his brow, he ran up and down the room, while the old pastor slept the sleep of the just.

XXII

AFTER the formal reconciliation between the two neighbouring families, Leo had the Uhlenfelde ferry station, which had of late fallen into disuse, quickly repaired. The old boat, which seemed to be now hardly watertight, was replaced by a new one, and the bathing-house, drawn up almost on to the dyke as a precaution against the coming floods, was converted into a shelter, so that the waiting groom and horses could bait there, when he should perchance, deep in conversation with his friend, have overstayed the hour of his return. And also, if he suddenly took it into his head to slip over to Uhlenfelde, there would be no necessity to make his movements known at the house. He would only have to put up his horse in the shelter and take the key, till the boat brought him back to the solitary spot, where there was no fear of incursions from spies and eavesdroppers.

This occurred to him the day after the pastor's visit, as he took his way over the turnip-fields to Uhlenfelde. It was not so much longing for his friend's society that drew him constantly thither, as a torturing uneasiness and a hungry desire to know that all was going well there.

To-day, when he entered the courtyard, he saw Felicitas standing at one of the castle windows, nodding and smiling at him.

"I must try, by hook or by crook, to get a private word with her," he thought, and returned her greeting with a wave of the hand.

"The master has driven in to Münsterberg," said the groom, who appeared from the coach-house. "It is the sessions to-day."

He muttered an oath. The confounded old priest had put out his calculations, and he had forgotten the day of the month. And over there Felicitas was still standing at the window smiling. To sneak away now would be the action of a coward.

His heart beat quicker as he ascended the steps to the house. Since that day of the meeting on the island he had never been alone with her. She received him in the garden salon, the glass doors of which were partially closed to keep out the autumnal chilliness. She sat with her hands folded in her lap and did not cease smiling. This smile, in which melancholy, irony, and forgiveness were mingled, seemed to have been learnt by heart.

"It almost looks as if you were afraid of me, my friend," she said, as she hesitatingly offered him her hand.

"In all my life I have never feared death or devil," he said, forcing himself into a swaggering tone. "And certainly I have never been afraid of you."

"But you run away from me and avoid me whenever you can. I wouldn't mind betting that your coming to-day is a mistake. Had you remembered that Ulrich would not be at home . . . ?"

"Ah!" he interposed with a click of his tongue.

"But you can be quite easy in your mind. I won't bite you. No, I don't bite." And she showed the whole of her white set of teeth as she laughed.

He thought, "Thank God! she isn't fretting." And a feeling of satisfaction came back.

"You'll stay a few minutes, I hope," she said lightly. "I'll try and make up for Ulrich."

That sounded modest and ingenuous enough. He bowed assent.

"Then let us go to my room," she said; "there we shan't be disturbed."

A slight aversion came over him at the thought of the boudoir, with its feminine ornaments and luxury, and its heavily perfumed air which half stifled him.

"Or perhaps you would rather stay here?" she asked, divining with quick instinct the ground of his hesitation.

"If it's all the same to you, I would rather."

She spread out her hands—a little gesture which was meant to convey that her only wish was to do what he wished.

There was a short silence. The late September sunshine filled the spacious room with warm-toned hues. Autumnally lazy flies buzzed and fell about on the window panes. No other sound disturbed the afternoon peacefulness, which seemed almost too sabbatical, too slumbrous, for this guilty pair.

Felicitas leaned back in a corner of the lounge, and with a sigh of deep content said, "Thank God."

"Why do you thank God?" he asked.

"That at last I have got you for once all to myself."

"You have got something to be proud of," he said ironically.

"Now, now, Leo!" she remonstrated, smiling. "You don't believe half you say. Sitting opposite each other like this it is quite unnecessary to draw the filmiest veil over our souls, or to hide a corner of them from one another. And that does one good, especially when one has had to go through life telling so many lies. Ah! I have so longed for truth. It is a kind of platonic affair, you see, that may be calmly permitted, because it is quite safe to lead to no harm—and this makes me quite happy. At least I need not try

to appear better than I am to *you*. . . . As for you . . . you sacrifice yourself for my sake, I know, by sitting like this with me, and you have struggled against it. But you hate me—hate me!"

"I? Hate you? Nonsense!"

"You can't deny it, my friend. Still, I can put up with it—your great, grand hate, for I know that there is a little drop of friendship mixed with it. We two—ah, my God!—we two really ought to be able to have splendid times together. We have outlived our love, and that is a delightful state of things—when one cares for a man and yet doesn't want to love him."

She nestled herself in the cushions as if she were stretching limbs tired from the heat and burden of the day's work, in the well-earned repose of a cool bed.

"I might even go so far, my friend, as to say," she continued, moistening the corners of her mouth with her tongue, "that the present relations between you and me are the most desirable that can exist between a man and a woman."

He laughed almost against his will. How comical she was in her irresponsible *naïveté*. Perhaps it wasn't right to take her too seriously after all. One must listen to her patiently, as one listened to the chatter of a child and smiled.

"I am in earnest," she went on. "Thousands who have studied human nature have said that love is nothing but a sort of war. The woman dislikes the man's desire, yet would dislike still more to forego it. The man is enraged at the woman's resistance, yet can't endure her not to resist and give herself to him without a struggle. How stupid it all is! and how vulgar! Not till it is all over, not till nothing remains but the memory of a few dreamy hours of bliss——"

"And repentance," he interrupted gloomily.

She gave him a horrified look. "You are cruel," she whispered, twirling a bow of her dress round her forefinger.

"I only wish to remind you," he replied, "that all is not as it ought to be between us."

"As if I didn't know it!" she sighed.

"You talk," he went on, "just as if we were heathens, artists, or Bohemians. That doesn't do. We are made of different material. Our blood may be hot too, it is true. Opportunity may turn us into thieves before we know it, but we have always a skeleton in the cupboard in the shape of our infernal protestant conscience——"

"Don't talk of conscience, I entreat you."

"And a certain residuum of what is called sense of duty."

"Ah! why embitter the first confidential hour we are passing together?" she murmured faintly.

"We have no confidential hours to pass together," he answered roughly.

She folded her hands. "My God, I know it, I know all. What I said just now was said to force my own conscience into trying to cheer you. . . . What good can come of filling each other's ears with lamentations?"

He was silent. How everything was reversed since that morning on the island! She now defended the standpoint that he had then taken up, while he let himself be swayed by consciousness of sin as she had done then. A few minutes before he had feared nothing so much as to hear her lament, now he himself was driving her to it.

"You are right, Lizzie," he said, "we must quietly contain ourselves, and spare each other reproaches, for old sins can't be undone. But the devil take us if we forget the object for which we have entered into this new alliance."

"How, in God's name, could we forget it?" she cried, putting her hands before her face.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Now that their mutual purity of motive had been solemnly attested on both sides afresh, he need no longer be so much on his guard, and might without suspicion and self-reproach give himself up to the charm of this dreaded *tête-à-tête*.

And indeed it was not without its charm.

Here was a sympathetic echo to those thoughts which for months had tormented him, growing harder and more frequent day by day, bound up, as it were, with every experience, meeting, and memory, and yet remaining unspoken, so that their weight on his overburdened heart had been well-nigh unbearable. Out of this pair of blue swimming eyes his own guilt looked at him confidingly, softened and cleared by the woman's grace. No harsh judgments blared from those soft lips, and when they whisperingly alluded to a sin which had better have remained unmentioned, they did so with a mild self-accusation that in itself was for him forgiveness. That was comforting—ay, it was comforting. He leaned back in his chair with a murmur of satisfaction, and asked if he might light a cigar.

"You know you may do anything you like," she replied, and rose to fetch him a tray and matches.

"Are you going to wait on me?" he exclaimed, springing up.

"Yes; let me. I like it, and you know it's not the first time," she said, with her melancholy smile.

He watched her as she glided gracefully across the room in her pale-blue lounge-gown. The loose lace sleeves swept out from the upper part of the rounded arms and fell in transparent little folds against the corset, the stiff whalebone lines of which were visible through the thin dress, shooting upwards like rays into the full contour of her breast, where a satin bow gently vibrated. The figure, in its ripeness and soft outlines, seemed expressive of an exquisite repose, gained after passion had burnt low and peace had

been prayed and fought for. There was nothing of the Magdalene in it, only her sad, always veiled eyes knew how to sing with the best effect the song of sweet sin and bitter repentance.

She sank into her seat again, and gazed out on the park, lost in dreams. The rapidly sinking sun flooded the room with a purple glow, and painted arabesques of gold upon the walls.

Leo, occupied with his cigar, let his eyes follow the rings of smoke as they encroached on the sunlight's domain and were transformed into clear flame-edged blue.

"You are a great deal alone now, I suppose?" he asked, by way of setting the conversation going again.

"Nearly always," she answered.

"What do you do with yourself, all day long?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Are you active in the housekeeping line?"

She pouted. "Yes; but it bores me."

"And—and . . . visitors leave you in peace?"

She flushed to her neck. "What visitors?"

"You know . . . the youths."

She smiled, apparently deeply ashamed. "Why do you remind me of that?" she rebuked him. "I shudder when I think of the way in which only a short time ago I sought my pleasures. Oh, Leo, how different I feel, how much better and purer, since you came into my life again!"

"I can't say the same for myself," he thought, remembering what he had gone through; but he felt flattered, nevertheless, at being recognised as a good angel.

"I cling to you," Felicitas went on, "with all the best instincts of my nature, for I know that you are the one person who can help me. And when I wrestle with my torture . . ."

"Now she's going to be tragic," he thought. But her tragedy was no longer so fatal as it had once seemed. If he could not echo her way of expressing things, he understood only too well the mood which prompted her so to express herself.

"And now I say," Felicitas continued, "all the evil spirits and goblins of hell may attack me; I have got him, he is there; he will stand by me and not desert me, and so hope and peace have dawned in my soul once more."

She sighed, and, digging both her fists into the cushions, she sat there and gazed at him with parted lips, craving for succour, while her mass of fair curls fell about her ears like a confusion of writhing serpents.

"Of course," she continued, "I relied much on you. But when I wanted you most, you did not come. You went away. Oh, Leo, how cruel you have been to me! No, no! I won't hurt you. You

are good, good as an angel. You have even forgiven me for forcing my way into Halewitz a second time. It's true, isn't it, you have forgiven me? And I have dared, too, to beard Johanna, to ameliorate her hate for you and me. Why, then, do you shun me? Why may I not call on you when it is all darkness and night within me, and the ghost of the slain——"

He trembled. The ghastly picture that the old pastor's drunken phantasy had invoked rose before his mental vision.

"Does he haunt you too?" he murmured, between his clenched teeth.

"Don't ask. . . . I must be silent. . . . It is better for you and for me not to speak of it. . . . Then how could you have borne to stay away from me, if you had known——"

"Known what?"

"Another time, I'll tell you," she said imploringly. "Another time, when I feel miserable, not now, when I'm happy and breathe freely, because I am so safe with you beside me. Let me enjoy this hour to the full. Look at the sun melting into those red clouds. Doesn't it look as if it were weeping over us tears of blood?"

He grunted, for the simile seemed to him extravagantly poetic.

"Oh, why did we ever meet?" she murmured, turning her face up to the setting sun, so that it became suffused with a rosy glow. She sighed, but the sigh lost itself in a smile.

"As we are on the subject," he said, feeling that the conversation had taken a dangerous turn, but at a loss how to change it into another channel, "meeting had nothing to do with it. For a year or more we had associated without any harm coming of it, despite the old boy-and-girl flirtation behind us. We should have been more careful to keep our inclinations in hand, that's all. Rhaden left us too much alone We had too many opportunities of strolling in the park after dark, and sitting in shady nooks. That's what did it . . . that's what did it."

Half lying on the cushions, she propped her chin in her hands.

"I wonder how the idea first came into our heads?" she asked dreamily.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Can one say afterwards how such things happen?" he said. "It's like fever; no one knows how he gets it."

"I remember, though, how it began," she whispered, still gazing at the sun. "It was a July evening. Rhaden had something to do in the town. . . . We were in the arbour, under the cut cypresses. You have got one like it at Halewitz. Do you remember the arbour?"

Why did she ask? Till their dying hour, they were both bound

to remember the place that had been the temple of their happiness and the origin of their damnation.

"It was dark all round us; we could scarcely see each other. Your cigar had gone out . . . you wanted a light . . . I said, 'Let me help you,' and as I held the burning match to the end of your cigar, and you drew in the flame with a deep breath, you raised your hand and stroked my hand which held the match, three times, and just as it flickered up for the last time, our eyes met . . . and then I knew . . . knew that it would happen."

"You knew it already?"

She nodded; and as if it were the fading radiance of their past and vanished joy, the reflection of the sun, which had now sunk beneath the horizon, lay purple and mysterious on her face.

"We women are quick to discern that sort of thing," said she; "before you men know exactly what it is you want, we feel it drawing near. It is like a warm draught of air blowing against us. Many of us don't know what it is to feel well except in such an air."

"If you noticed so much, why weren't you on your guard?" he asked sternly.

"What is the use of guarding against the decree of fate?" she said, piously clasping her hands.

"Why didn't you drive me away? Why did you allow me to come back?"

"Because I was so glad that you came back."

"Yes, yes . . . forgive me . . . you are right. It is I who ought to have known, and to have fled away, miles away. It was not your fault . . . it was mine."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Leo," she begged. "Things came as they were bound to come. We were both defenceless then. Do you still remember how, after the match was gone out, it was all dark in the arbour, and we were both quite, quite silent? For a long time I heard nothing but your breathing, short and hard. . . . You must tell me, Leo, what were you thinking about during those minutes?"

He would have cried out, "Leave me in peace with your questions," but only too vividly did the picture rise before his eyes of that sultry purple July night which was the beginning of all the mischief.

"What was I thinking about?" he murmured. "I don't know that I thought at all. . . . At least, I can't recall anything that I thought. But when we stood up and walked to the house, I remember that I asked myself, 'Why was it her shoulder felt so warm against my arm?' . . . I put it down to the hot summer air. . . . But when I was in bed, I still felt your shoulder against my arm that I recollect perfectly to-day."

Felicitas looked at him, smiling. But in the midst of her smile she broke into convulsive weeping. She threw back her head, stretched herself out full length on the cushions, her whole body shaken by her violent sobs. One of her shoes slipped off and fell clattering on the floor.

Leo, shocked and deeply moved, got up and came to her side.

"Why . . . why," she sobbed, "why must it have been so? Now I am wretched and abandoned, and you are wretched too, and the others. Oh, Jesus, have pity!"

"Do—do be reasonable," he urged, trying to conceal his fear by harshness.

"Yes, yes—tell me what to do. . . . I will obey and do all you command."

"You must calm yourself first. Suppose some one came in." His glance wandered uneasily to the door.

"Oh, I will be calm directly. Oh, Lord! Lord!"

"Felicitas."

He would have liked to shake her, but was afraid to touch her with his hands.

At the severity of his tone, she raised herself and wiped her face with limp hands.

"I am weak," she stammered; "please get me my flask from the next room."

He hurried away to do her bidding, for he was still consumed with anxiety that they might be surprised in their present situation. When he came back, she was lying motionless face downwards on the cushions. He called her name. Instead of answering, she pointed to the back of her head.

He sprinkled a few drops of the strongly scented liquid on her hair, and then wiped his damp hands quickly on his coat-sleeve. She turned round.

"Now my forehead," she whispered, with closed eyes.

He moistened her temples.

"How kind you are!" she whispered; and then went on, "one has to become as miserable as this to learn what true compassion is."

"Sit up now," he commanded.

"You are right," she replied, lifting wide eyes to his. "Our time is up. Ulrich may be back at any minute."

Ulrich! The blood flamed into his face. His friend's name fell painfully upon him like a whip.

"I must go at once!" he exclaimed.

"Won't you wait and see him?" she asked innocently.

He shook his head and set his teeth.

"But you'll come to-morrow, will you not . . . to-morrow?"

He could do nothing but dumbly assent.

She bent over the edge of the sofa to look for the lost slipper, which was hidden somewhere in the wainscotting. When she sat upright, she was smiling again. The blue eyes had regained their wonted lustre, only on the round cheeks flashed in rosy drops the last traces of her tears.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked.

"Why angry?"

"Because I have made this foolish scene. But the burden of unshed tears was oppressing my soul. . . . And now that I have cried it away I feel more light-hearted and happier than I have done for months. . . . Oh, Leo . . . let me thank you for the comfort you have given me!" And in her overflowing gratitude she caught his two giant hands in her soft little palms and tried to press them.

He hurriedly took his leave. It seemed as if something were hunting him from the spot. But ashamed of his haste, he turned once more at the door.

"Remember me to him," he said, looking steadily into her eyes. She nodded, and then bent her eyes on the floor.

When he had left the entrance hall, she climbed with languid steps to the top story, where from the corner balcony there was a view of the stream. She watched him hurrying thither, with her hands pressed against her forehead, and saw him unmoor the boat from the sandy bank and launch it with a mighty shove, while he jumped in and seized the oars before the fragile craft had time to drift an inch with the current. She took out her handkerchief in order to wave him farewell, but he did not look up, and the white wisp of cambric fluttered unseen in the twilight.

The boat became a shadow and disappeared. She shivered and thought of the boy, far away, at the cost of whose banishment she had purchased this hour. Then, listening cautiously at the door, she drew a letter from her pocket, and gazed with emotion at the laboriously penned characters, and read once more the incoherent words which had been distressing her since yesterday:—

"My Dearest Mamma,

"I am homsick and how long must I stay here and please tell me if I may come home for Christmas holydays all the other boys are going home for the holydays, but I am not a coward, no I am not a bit a coward, and when they beat me I bite my teeth together, and the banging *does* hurt. . . . But if you think I Cry, I don't; no I only Cry when I am alone in the evening after prayers; that does'nt matter does it? And I pray for dear mamma and dear papa, that he may'nt be ill any longer, and I want Fido so dreadfully and how is the little mare I used to ride? You know dear mamma. I do hate being here and want to come home.

"It is 87 days to Christmas and I want a stamp-album, and scholar's 'Young Companion,' and a pistol that you shoot not with caps but there's a feather in it like an arrow and the cherry cakes that old Jetta bakes always. And I long to see old Jetta too. With kisses from

"Your loving son,
"PAULCHEN."

Felicitas crumpled the sheet in her hand in nervous irritation. "My God, my God, how will it end?" she murmured. Then, as if to escape from herself, she ran in from the balcony and paced up and down in the great empty attic.

"I can't, I mayn't, I won't think about it!" she cried. "Thousands of children have gone through the same, and outlived it. He will get over it too."

She shut the glass door, and, pressing her forehead against the panes, stared at the spot where a few minutes ago the boat had disappeared, and gradually her face cleared and took on an expression of dreamy tenderness.

XXIII

HERTHA had a sharp little nose, and she had made therewith a discovery, a discovery which in happier circumstances would not have signified much, but which in the troubled condition of affairs carried great weight.

As she sat at supper, which meal was unusually honoured that day by step-mamma's presence, she became aware of a peculiar perfume, the same which was indissolubly associated in her mind with the memory of a pale, sweetly smiling countenance, and a pair of big blue imploringly uplifted eyes.

This perfume had seemed to her the crowning distinction of graceful elegance. She had often tried to recall it, and as the finest scented soap gave no idea of it, she resolved that she would instantly procure it in four years and four months' time, when she came into possession of her fortune. And now, as if wafted by magic from Uhlenfelde, this perfume suddenly pervaded the supper-table. She sniffed it in inquiringly, and measured with her eyes one after the other, mamma, Elly, grandmamma, but missed out Leo.

Johanna, who sat stiffly at the table, immovable as a statue, making everybody else feel uncomfortable, gave her stepdaughter an astonished look.

Hertha saved herself by asking leave to hand round the dish of potato-chips which Christian had left in the lurch to attend to the cutlets. While she passed from one chair to another she sampled critically the immediate atmosphere round each. And, sure enough, when she came with the dish behind Leo's place, the insidious fragrance rose to her nostrils with threefold power.

But Leo did not like scents—on the contrary, only a short time ago, when Christian had thought it necessary in honour of the Sabbath to plaster his grey straggly locks with hair-oil, he had been told, with a *donnerwetter!* to go and put his head under the pump. Leo helped himself to potatoes without bestowing a glance on the waitress who handed them. He seemed distrait and surly, and instead of eating, toyed with his knife-rest. Mamma's presence truly might be responsible for his temper, but Hertha suspected other causes.

The conversation was confined to monosyllabic questions and answers. Grandmamma inquired how many geese were to be stuffed for liver and how many fattened?

"Do as you like," said Leo.

"Were you at Uhlenfelde to-day?" Johanna asked suddenly.

Hertha sat erect on the *qui vive*. Ah, what would he say?

"No," was the short, sharp rejoinder. He did not like to be cross-examined, least of all by Johanna, who showed no disinclination to play the spy on him.

He was still wondering himself how the falsehood had escaped his lips when he glanced down the table and met Hertha's large shining eyes, which were fixed on him shocked and reproachful.

"The little one is getting uneasy," he thought; and as he was anxious to be alone, he rose and left the table, with a "Gesegneter Mahlzeit."

Every one looked after him.

"What can ail him?" asked grandmamma, referring to the food he had scarcely touched.

"He has had a lot of trouble with the foaling," put in Hertha, acting on an impulse, dimly felt, that it was her place to stand up for him.

She was quite sure that she hated him; but, all the same, whatever he did was no business of anybody else's. After supper she rushed into the dusky garden She felt as if something had happened within her and without, the existence of which, up till now, she had not dreamed. She didn't know what it was, or what to call it, but that it was nothing good was proved by the anger which stormed in her breast at the thought of it. What did it mean if the beautiful woman had really poured some of her perfume on to his coat? But no, that wasn't the question. Why had he degraded himself by telling a lie? He, the haughty Leo, who had so loftily disdained her humble love! Why had he made a secret of this visit to Uhlenfelde, when, as a rule, he came from there openly, bringing messages of greeting from his friend?

Of course this beauty was a thousand times more beautiful than she was, and much cleverer, no doubt. It did not need much self-abasement to accord her the superiority. But the great insoluble problem, the stumbling-block to all her conjectures, was that she was a married woman. If only she had not been, then he could have been in love with her; but as it was, how could he? Women were loved by their husbands, that was what they married for, but by no one else in the world. Otherwise you might as well fall in love with Uncle Kutowski, or the dog, Leo, who at this moment was rubbing his damp nose against her sleeve, full of consolatory affection.

Shivering in the chill autumn wind, and yet with burning cheeks,

she ran up and down the dew-spangled paths, where rustling dry leaves whirled before her like startled animals. She heard Leo's voice coming from the yard, raised to a scolding pitch, as he inspected the ploughs by lantern-light. Leo, the dog, answered with a joyous bay, and bounded off twice, but returned to her in the end.

"You are better than your master," she whispered, burying her face in his mane; and she decided that to-day, if possible, she would get to the bottom of this question about married people being beloved by some one to whom they weren't married.

First of all she sought information in her library. "The Lamplighter," to begin with, then "Goldelse," and "Barefeet." These were the maturist novels that she possessed. The writings of Clara Cron and Otilie Wildemuth were as yet not even to be thought of. She couldn't find any reference to the problem that bothered her, not even a hint that it existed. So she turned from fiction to the classics. Schiller—Amalia was a young girl—Luise (now she was coming to it, perhaps) a married woman—Queen of Spain, of course. But in this case it was clear as daylight that you couldn't believe the poet; for to be in love with your stepmother was a thing which could only happen in the world of imagination, that world in which genius, detached from earth and intoxicated with inspiration, roams at large. She hadn't written for nothing a German composition two years ago on "Genius and Reality," in which this question had been exhaustively dealt with. Those beautiful phrases, "genius detached from earth," and "intoxicated with inspiration," were quotations from it.

"Why are you rummaging so amongst the books?" asked Elly, who was already in bed, and before falling asleep, enjoying herself by stretching the counterpane tight between her teeth and feet, and pretending to play the banjo on it. As she alternately tightened and slackened her hold on the linen, it produced sounds, high and low, which distantly resembled those of a stringed instrument.

Hertha considered whether she should demean herself so far as to ask advice from this child. But, in her dire necessity, she did not long demur.

"Look here, Mouse," she said, sitting down by the head of the bed, "I want to ask you something. You are in love with a man, aren't you?"

"Oh yes," replied Elly, playing with her fingers.

"And you are quite sure that this man loves you too?"

"Why do you say *man?*" asked Elly. "Kurt is my ideal. Before it was Benno, and before that Alfred, but now it is Kurt. But, all the same, I don't think of him as a man."

"What is he, then?"

"Why, a *young* man."

"Well, young man, if you like. Certainly, he is not my idea of a man." And her eyes gleamed with enthusiasm. Did she not know what a proper man *ought* to be like? "Do you think, Mouse, that any man, or young man—it doesn't matter which—could love a married woman?"

"Of course . . . quite easily," answered Elly, in her superb serenity.

Hertha smiled surreptitiously at such denseness. "No, Mouse, you don't understand," she said. "I don't mean the woman who is his wife, but the woman who is married to some one else."

"That's what I mean too."

"And it seems to you quite natural?"

"Really, I should not have thought you so inexperienced," said the little lady. "One's bound to know such things. In old days it was much worse. The man who was a brave knight *always* loved the wife of some one else. To love his own would have been thought ridiculous. . . . It is all in König's 'Unabridged History of Literature.'"

Hertha had become very thoughtful. "Ah! the olden times," she said, with a faint smile. "It's no good talking of them. They tilted at tournaments then, and killed each other with their lances for fun!"

"And to-day," said Elly in a whisper, raising herself in bed with the wide eyes of a child reading a fairy tale, "to-day they shoot each other dead with pistols for a joke instead."

Hertha felt a stab at her heart, and the little rosy daughter of Eve went on.

"I should think it lovely to have such an unhappy affair when married. . . . For, you know, most of the romantic love stories are of this kind."

"Who told you so?"

"Don't you remember what Käthi Graffenstein said about her aunt?"

"Pah!" cried Hertha. "Whatever *she* said about it would sure to be a lie."

The conversation ceased at this point, for, after Elly letting fall the much-hated name, Hertha refused to talk any more. But long after the light had been put out she lay awake pondering, and tried by various experimental thoughts to penetrate the veil which hung between her childlike outlook and life. The next afternoon she approached, with faltering step, kind grandmamma, whose wooden knitting-needles were busily employed on one of her favourite Shetland wool shawls.

"Have you an uneasy conscience?" asked grandmamma, who thought she knew what she wanted.

"God forbid! I only wish to know, am I properly grown up, or am I not?"

"Well . . . half and half," suggested grandmamma, giving her a smiling scrutiny over her spectacles.

Hertha drew a deep breath. She had entered on a daring enterprise, she knew, but, at all costs, she must clear up this matter.

"I mean that I shall probably soon be married, and I——"

"You!" exclaimed grandmamma, in deadly terror.

The unhappy child had evidently come to break to her the proposal of some saucy youth in the neighbourhood.

"Of course . . . ," continued Hertha, mouthing her words, . . . "of course . . . with all my money I am not likely to be an old maid."

Grandmamma caught hold of her hands. "Child, whom have you got in your mind?" she cried, beginning to perspire with anxiety.

Hertha blushed to the roots of her hair. "I? . . . nobody," she stuttered, struggling to maintain a nonchalant tone.

"You are talking indefinitely?"

"Yes . . . of course . . . indefinitely."

Grandmamma ventured to breathe more freely again, and determined forthwith that she would talk seriously to Leo that very day, and warn him that the "gold fish" might be snapped up by some one else under his very eyes, if he did not look out.

"And . . . now let me hear what you want to know."

"I want to know . . . about love . . . after marriage."

Grandmamma, who was used to these sort of questions, though lately they had been less frequent than of old, replied lightly, "It's the same after as before."

"Yes . . . I know. But if there's another . . . to whom one is not married . . . "

"Gracious! *what?*" Grandmamma let her glasses fall off her nose in sheer horrified amazement. "What other?"

Hertha felt a sudden collapse of her heart-strings. She had to make energetic demands on her courage to be able to proceed.

"Can't it happen, dear grandmamma, that some one who isn't married to us, can get into his head . . ."

"Hertha," interrupted the old lady, "look me straight in the eyes and tell me if you have been reading a forbidden book."

"How could I, grandmamma?"

"What are you reading now?"

"Oh, a yarn that Meta Podewyl lent me."

"We say story, not yarn. Who wrote it?"

"Felix Dahn."

"And what is it about?"

"I hardly know. Some one is always being stabbed dead by

some one else. Some of them come to life again, and some of them are buried. There's no harm in that."

"No, certainly there is no harm in that," thought grandmamma; and then she said, "Don't come to me with such stupid questions again, child . . . you are too young by far to understand such things. And now give me a kiss, and take your crochet."

So another plan had failed. Yet Hertha went on wondering how she was to solve the dark mystery with which her jealous heart was so blindly grappling.

The same day at dinner Leo made the unexpected proposal of rowing her and Elly over to the Isle of Friendship. He knew how long Hertha had cherished the wish to see with her own eyes the romantic spot, and thought that by giving her her desire he would improve the relations between them, which, he didn't know why, seemed to grow more strained from day to day.

But Hertha slightly curled her lips and remarked, "Many thanks; when I care to visit the island, I will row myself over."

"You'll try again?" he laughed.

"Yes, why not? There are two boats there now, and you can't want more than one at a time when you happen to be visiting Uhlenfelde."

There was something in her pronunciation of the last few words which vexed and irritated him.

"Nevertheless, my dear child," he replied, "I must ask you kindly to refrain from any more mad escapades; there really is no necessity for you periodically to rouse the neighbourhood."

"I promise you that I shall give you no further ground for complaint on that score," she made answer with quivering lips.

He nodded, immediately pacified, and grandmamma changed the topic to household matters.

Towards sunset, when Leo mounted his mare, Hertha, watching him from the garden, felt all the annoyance and antagonism of the evening before awake in her again. She would have liked to throw herself on the grass and tear up the sod with her fingers.

It was true that he rode out in the direction of Wengern, but Hertha had little doubt that he intended to make a *détour* the quicker to reach the stream.

"Oh, if only I knew whether that could be so!" she thought, and gnashed her teeth.

Then she was seized with a brilliant idea.

Meta Podewyl, who had been transformed these four months into a sedate Frau von Sembritzky, used to be her confidential friend before her engagement. They had exchanged all sorts of promises and sealed their vow of friendship with endless kisses.

The first who, etc., should be the first to, etc.

But, as things had turned out, there had been no talk on either side of these promises being fulfilled, for the intimate relations between her and Meta had ceased, as most girls' friendships do in the early days of betrothal. And although she had followed the fortunate girl to the altar as her bridesmaid, she had long ago seemed to have vanished into an unknown far-away world to which she lacked a passport.

But now her happiness and peace of mind were at stake, and only Meta could help her.

In the evening, at bed-time, she said to Elly, "If I ask you to-morrow to drive over with me to see Meta, you must say 'No.' You understand?" The Mouse did not understand in the least, but submitted as usual with an inclination of her little fair head, and fell asleep.

The next day it rained, and as Hertha had no closed carriage at her command, she stayed at home. Two more wet days followed, in which Hertha's devouring curiosity had to rest unsatisfied. But when a fourth dawned hopelessly grey, with rain pattering on the windows, she resolved to pocket her pride and petition Leo, through the medium of grandmamma, for horse and carriage.

"Why these roundabout dealings, Hertha?" he said, as they met at table. "I should have thought you knew that the conveyances are as much at your disposal as any one else's."

At two o'clock that afternoon the carriage stood at the door, and she drove off in pouring rain.

She was lucky in the hour she had chosen. Meta's husband had gone into Münsterberg, and mamma-in-law, who made the young couple happy by her presence in the house, was suffering from a bilious attack.

So she found Meta alone in her bedroom, with its heavy satin curtains, its dainty muslin covers, its comfortable low sofa, and lamp with emerald-green shade, and all the thousand and one pretty knickknacks, and mysterious articles which betoken a recently accomplished matrimonial union, and seem to invite a cosy confidential chat.

Still, the reception accorded Hertha by her old chum was not altogether encouraging. She rose languidly from the rocking-chair in which she had been reclining, looking very delicate and fragile, and with a faint smile extended a cold thin hand, on which the wide hoop of her wedding-ring seemed conspicuously to inspire respect. A book bound in brown and gold slid from her lap on to the floor.

Hertha took in at a first glance how much Meta's young fresh-coloured little face had changed during the months since her marriage. Her nose had sharpened, and her full lips were pale,

and the different way in which her hair was dressed made her quite a stranger.

"I am delighted to see you," she said, just as one dowager receives another when she pays her a formal visit. In fact, Hertha felt intimidated.

"What were you reading?" she asked, picking up the brown-and-gold book from the floor.

The little wife blushed hotly, and hurriedly took the book out of her hand, but not before Hertha had deciphered the gold letters on the back: "Ammon's Duties of Mothers."

"I never!" said Hertha. "May you read that?"

"I must read it," replied the young wife, with a slightly ironical twist of her mouth.

Hertha burned on the spot to gallop through the remarkable volume. She would have liked above all things to have laid it on her lap and asked her friend to leave her in peace for an hour or two. But she was too embarrassed to give any hint of her wishes.

"What shall we have with our coffee?" asked Meta, momentarily anxious to display her authority as mistress of the house. "Meringues, jam pancakes, or apple-fritters?"

"Can you really order anything you like?" asked Hertha, full of admiring envy. At this moment she could almost have made up her mind to accept a husband who was not Leo.

"Naturally I can order what I like," replied her friend, with a melancholy little shake of the head. But she might have truthfully added, "That is, when Hans's mamma has a bilious attack."

"Well, then, I should like apple-fritters best!" exclaimed Hertha, with a sigh of relief, for now they seemed to be getting a more human footing.

As she threw her hat and cloak in a corner, she caught sight of a pair of pouter pigeons fluttering from the ceiling, holding a corner of the bed-canopy in their half-open bills.

"Oh, how perfectly heavenly!" she cried. "If I were married and might have everything I wanted, I would hang a gold cage up there with a nightingale in it, to sing me to sleep every night."

Her friend made no answer, but she smiled. And this smile, indulgent and sad, in which there lay worlds of profound knowledge, told Hertha that she had said something extraordinarily stupid. She rubbed her nose in her confusion, then drew herself erect again, for it seemed to her necessary to recapture her dignity.

A further survey of the room revealed new wonders at every turn. On the toilette table, which, like the bed, had a canopy of silken gauze draped above it, was an array of brushes, bottles, round and square boxes, all made of the same lapis lazuli glass.

She took out stoppers and lifted covers enviously. In one of

the boxes she found a powder-puff. It was the first time in all her young life that she had held a powder-puff in her hand.

"May you powder too?" she asked.

Meta shook her head, laughing. "I might if I liked," she said, "but I don't."

Hertha felt a burning desire to guide the white soft ball of down over her face, but forebore from exposing her vanity before her friend.

"I suppose that you are very, very happy?" she asked.

"Thank God, yes," replied her friend, in a tone of solemn seriousness which Hertha couldn't understand, because she had always thought happiness was a laughing matter, and only unhappiness a subject that required to be treated seriously.

Her eyes began to wander round the room again, for she was keenly anxious to discover all the curiosities it contained. Suddenly she gave a start, for there in a corner she alighted on a row of high button-boots, of dimensions so enormous that no woman's feet could have filled them.

"How do they come there?" she asked timidly.

"They are Hans's Wellingtons," replied Meta, in a matter-of-course tone, which crushed her afresh.

It seemed to her as if the Wellingtons grew visibly to a still more gigantic size, and formed an insurmountable barrier between her and her friend. She began at the same time to resent the reserve with which Meta continued to behave towards her. . . . The days when they had sat in corners together and giggled and tittered while they crunched peppermint bull's-eyes out of a bag that lay across their laps, and now and then flipped each other behind the ear, seemed gone for ever.

"She, too, is going to prove faithless," thought Hertha, and her heart flamed up within her, as it always did at anything which recalled the fleeting vision of treacherous Käthi Greiffenstein.

But that had nothing to do with her mission. Most undoubtedly any one who was on such familiar and intimate terms with a man's Wellingtons, must be able to enlighten her with regard to the mystery she was so eager to have explained. But she didn't dare yet throw out any hints of her thirst for knowledge. They talked of one thing and another, Meta maintaining her gentle smile and reticent manner. After about half an hour, she rose and explained with a sigh that she must go and inquire how mamma was—if her visitor would excuse her.

And Hertha was left alone. How could she make use of the time? For she had settled in her mind that she would make use of it, only she was undecided between duties of mothers and the powder-puff. At last, after a short but sharp struggle, the powder-puff

gained the day. Her eyes guiltily fixed on the door, she snatched the little implement, and with a trembling, hasty movement, dabbed it over her forehead and cheeks. Then she ventured to take a nervous glance at herself in the mirror, and what she saw frightened her. . . . It was the face of a corpse!

Now she knew how she would look when she lay in her coffin with a wreath of myrtle on her hair and with roses in her marble hands—so pale, so beautiful!

She let her head fall as far back as possible on her neck, and dropped her lids so low that only a misty slit between her lashes was left for her to see through. Both her neck and the back of her head began to ache, but she did not stir.

"Had I been one quarter so fair in my lifetime," she thought, "as I am in death, he would not have disdained my love." A sweet longing to shed tears came over her, but she did not give way to it for fear of disfiguring her snow-white cheeks with brown channels.

"If he saw me like this," she went on, talking to herself, "he would be bound to repent his coldness. . . . While every one else was asleep, he would come on tiptoe to stand by my bier . . . he would throw himself on his knees and cover my rigid face with passionate kisses."

She shuddered. The fire-light from the inn hearth on that never-to-be-forgotten summer evening flickered before her. "And suppose I only appeared to be dead and wasn't really," she went on, "or that his newly awakened love had the power of bringing me to life again. If I opened my eyes and stretched out my arms and drew him to me in full forgiveness."

And as she instinctively spread out those forgiving arms, she felt so much life and movement in her that the illusion of being dead vanished.

"What a pity!" she thought. "All that is beautiful passes like a dream."

She set to work at once to remove the powder from her face. With a handkerchief rolled into a ball she rubbed and scrubbed cheeks, forehead, and nose; and the harder she rubbed, the greater became her fear that she might not be able to wipe off all traces of her misdoing. Her heart beat loudly. She seemed to herself like a criminal on the verge of being discovered. At the sound of footsteps in the corridor, she let the handkerchief fall and retired to the most shadowy corner of the room behind the bed-curtains, where she pretended to be engrossed in the study of a picture.

"Mamma is asleep," said Meta, coming in, "and coffee is ready."

"Oh, is it?" replied Hertha, in confusion. She would have

given worlds to be able to stay in that dark corner, but of course it was not possible.

On the way to the dining-room she gave her cheeks a few more vigorous rubs, and then gallantly faced the light. She fancied that the old mamselle, who greeted her with a smile as she brought in the coffee, was mocking at her secretly; and when Meta's glance rested on her for more than a second, she could hold out no longer, and burying her hotly blushing face on her shoulder, she confessed her crime.

Meta smiled and kissed her, saying, "Never mind. We all do that some time in our lives."

"You too?" asked Hertha, daring to breathe freely again.

Meta nodded, and as mamma's going off to sleep had put her in a more cheerful humour, she added the confession that on the second morning of her wedded life, she had hardly had the patience to wait for Hans to go out of the room before flouring her face, so eager had she been to operate with the new powder-puff.

"But one soon gets over that sort of thing," she went on, with a thoughtful, hard look in her eyes.

Now the ice was really broken, and when the apple fritters arrived, frizzling crisply in their juice, Hertha thought the atmosphere was favourable for her great question. Still she struggled twice with herself before she was sure that she could combine the right moment with the right words. For she felt that her friend's new smile did not mean joking.

"There's one thing I want to ask you," she began, in a careless, casual sort of tone, though there was a choking sensation in her throat. "Wives love their husbands . . . that's taken for granted; but do you think it's possible that wives . . . can be . . . loved by men—men who are not their husbands?"

Her friend didn't smile this time, but laughed outright, and Hertha felt a stone fall from her heart. Here was some one who was not going to be shocked, she thought.

"How funny you are," Meta said. "No one can prevent people loving whom they choose."

"I know. . . . But a man, don't you see, ought not——"

"No; he *ought* not, but often does."

"Does any one else love *you*, then?"

Meta coloured. She looked into space. Perhaps she was thinking of the man who had first captured her maiden fancy.

"I don't ask," she said. "It is more than enough that I please Hans; and, of course, I shouldn't allow anything of the kind."

"Then it isn't allowed?"

"Of course not, when they tell you so straight out."

"What? Do they ever tell it?"

"Often. It happens if the man is a very bold lover."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Hertha, in horror. "If such a thing happened to me, I should show him the door pretty quick."

Then she became suddenly silent. She was asking herself the question, "What might *he* have said to her? What might she have answered?"

"Would it be possible," she inquired again eagerly, "for there to be women . . . who—who wouldn't mind?"

"Oh yes," replied Meta.

"Who in the end might return such a bold man's love?"

"Yes; even that."

The world seemed to spin round in Hertha's brain, and with all the energy of innocence she cried, "Meta, I won't believe it!"

"There is a good deal that you would not believe, that I now know to be facts."

"Tell me, tell me. What, please?"

"No; most of it can't be told," said her friend, guardedly. "Not to any one, at least, who is not married."

Hertha thought of the vow they had once exchanged, but an undefinable feeling of shyness stopped her from reminding the forgetful Meta of it.

"All I can tell you," she continued, "is that things are very different from what we girls think they are. Do you remember, for instance, how all our heads were turned once about your uncle?"

"Which uncle?" asked Hertha.

"Leo Sellenthin," replied Meta, glancing sideways.

Hertha sighed. She was only too willing to forget the relationship which gave him authority over her. And then, all at once, her heart seemed to stand still, for she understood that the next minute would be pregnant for her with revelation. She was to hear something terrible.

"Do you know what people said after that duel, when he shot Herr von Rhaden dead?"

"No," she murmured.

"They said that he and Felicitas were in love with each other, and that Rhaden found it out. Good Heavens! What is the matter?"

Hertha, with parted lips and dilated eyes, had raised her hands as if to ward off the blow that was about to fall on her.

"For goodness' sake, calm yourself!" cried Meta, stroking her face with both hands. "It was only gossip. Of course, it's not true, and no one believes it now."

"Why is it not true?"

"Because, if it were, Ulrich Kletzingk, who is his bosom friend and knows all about him, would not have married her."

"But if he hadn't known?"

"Then Leo would have confessed it to him before the marriage."

"But, suppose he had not confessed?"

"He would have been absolutely obliged to do it. If he hadn't, Leo would have behaved shabbily to his friend."

Hertha scarcely comprehended, but one thing was clear, and flamed like a torch of certainty through all this night of riddles: "They had been in love . . . they loved each other still . . . they would always love each other."

After this, she was indifferent to what she and Meta talked about. A yellow mist lay before her eyes, and Meta's voice sounded as if it came from a long way off, and fell on her ear without meaning. She answered, not knowing what she answered.

"How shall I get away?" she kept asking herself, and thought with horror of the time, that for decency's sake she must still stay. But her deliverance was nearer than she expected, although the manner in which it was effected filled her with new terror.

Meta, in the middle of her chatter, turned suddenly pale, gasped for breath, and then tumbled off her chair in a dead faint. Hertha rushed to her with a cry of alarm, seized the water-jug, and poured a stream of water on her face. Meta made a low gurgling sound, breathed heavily through her nose, and then came to herself again.

"Lord have mercy!" cried Hertha, kissing the wet forehead of the reviving girl. "I will go and tell them to send for the doctor at once."

But her friend stopped her. "No, don't go," she said, calmly raising herself. "You can't understand, but it must happen."

"To be married is like being in another world," thought Hertha, startled, "where fainting dead away is quite an everyday event."

Then she reflected how gladly she would have fainted a hundred times a day for the sake of one who despised and spurned her.

"I will go home at once; you ought to rest," she murmured, controlling her excitement with difficulty, and her friend did not press her to stay.

An hour later, when she appeared in the living-room at Halewitz, grandmamma exclaimed, horrified—

"What is the matter with you, child? You are as pale as death."

"Oh, it's nothing, grandmamma," she replied, and tried to laugh. "I have been such a goose as to powder myself."

XXIV

EVENING came, and Hertha roamed about as if she were walking in her sleep. When the bell sounded for supper, she felt she would rather creep away and hide somewhere in the wainscot than face him. But in her perplexed and limp condition she made no resistance when Elly came to drag her to the table.

He was in his place, and gave her a friendly nod as usual, but to-day his smile seemed to her expressionless and stony. How different he looked to her eyes from what he had ever looked before!

If fire had shot out of his mouth, she would have hardly been surprised. He seemed now to be really the demoniac person that she had once pictured in her foolish fancies, though what had then filled her with longing dreams now inspired her with dread and horror. From time to time she gave him a shy glance.

"How can any one sit there quietly," thought she, "concealing such awful secrets in his breast?"

He had become very silent lately. Grandmamma gave out that he was working himself to death. The grim line between his brows seemed to grow deeper day by day.

Hertha believed now that she knew the cause of that line. She almost wished it might kill him, for she hated him, and the sin that made him suffer was abhorrent to her.

She abhorred herself too, for the condition of hate and jealousy into which she had worked herself up seemed to her undignified and vulgar.

"If only I knew what I ought to do," she thought, "so that I needn't be ashamed. I must pray," she concluded finally, "and then perhaps I shall find out the right path to take."

Willingly would she have run out there and then into the dark garden to be alone with God, but the rain still poured down in torrents.

At bed-time Elly vexed her with absurd questions about what one should do if a lover came at midnight to run away with one. The childish chatter of her bosom friend filled her with mistrust of herself. "Perhaps I am as silly as she is," she mused, and because she didn't want to think of foolish things, she preferred not to think at all, and turned on her side and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night she woke up. The rain seemed to have left off, but a gale had risen, which rattled the shutters, and whistled and moaned through the keyholes. "Didn't I intend to pray and meditate?" Hertha asked, as she settled herself snugly amongst the pillows. She felt joyously excited at having cheated sleep, for even her troubles could not do more than increase and deepen in her the feeling of infinite zest in mere existence.

She folded her hands, but could not compose herself to pray, for her soul was whirled and tossed on the wings of sublime ideas and lofty resolves. Gradually the chaos cleared, and out of it rose in triumphant purity one solitary resolution.

She would renounce. Renounce all dreams of happiness, all hopes. Renounce all the empty little pleasures with which thoughtlessly she had been wont to deck her youth; renounce all the glittering tinsel of worldliness. Calm and noble, she would sacrifice herself to her neighbours' needs, death at her heart and a smile on her lips. Yes, so it should be. And shedding tears of sweet satisfaction, she floated into the realms of sleep once more.

In the morning, when she opened her eyes, sunshine greeted them. What had passed in the night seemed to her now as a God-sent dream, a miracle worked by Heaven to save her soul from despair.

She kissed Elly with redoubled vigour, and exhausted herself in performing little services for others, for this harmonised best with her present angelic mood.

Only during breakfast, as she met Leo's eyes, was she conscious of the bitterness which she thought she had conquered for ever, waking in her again.

This recurrence made her anxious and uneasy. "My resolution is too weak," she thought, "to be able to withstand the temptations of the world; I must strengthen and sanctify it by a solemn vow, so that it will be a positive sin if I fail again."

Nevertheless, though she racked her brains, she could devise no method holy and awful enough to endow her with sufficient power of resistance.

At last, in a flash, what she was seeking came to her. She would row over to the Isle of Friendship, the home of all gloomy mysteries. There before the blood-sprinkled sacrificial stone she would kneel in prayer, and at the same time open a vein of her arm and utter a vow over the flowing blood, so that her yearning and hate might be silenced for ever.

The hours went by in sacred expectation. Soon after the vesper coffee, she slipped out with the key of the bathing-house in her pocket. The wind swept across the wide meadow flats, and above her the sun, blood-red, was half hidden by a ragged fringe of stormy clouds. The grassy path had been saturated by the rain, and more

than once her feet stuck fast in the boggy ground, which oozed and gurgled as she set them free. But, without looking back, she hurried on. Like a phantasmagoria the rich half-submerged pastures melted behind her. The tall sheaves bent before the wind; all the flowers which in the past summer days had made so fair a border to the meadow path, lay on the ground broken and smirched in a liquid *mêlée.*

As she came in sight of the shining surface of the stream stretching into the distance, she started, for to-day it was swollen to twice its usual breadth, and the current much swifter. The heavy rains of the last few days were responsible. The boats had been drawn up almost on to the top of the dyke, and water was hissing from the foot of the reeds along which one could generally walk with tolerably dry feet. It was uncanny to hear the dry dark heads of the bulrushes, whipped by wind and wet, sighing and rattling as they struck against each other. For a moment she had almost a mind to retire from the foolhardy enterprise. But the next her old daring defiance took possession of her anew.

"If I am in earnest about my vow," she said to herself, "no bodily danger should stand in my way."

She loosened the chain of the boat, which slid down the declivity of the dyke nearly of its own accord. In the bathing-house she found the right oars, and put off into the stream.

Now a desperate struggle began, even before she had got clear of the reeds; the current caught the little craft and drove it into the thickest part of the sedge, so that the keel was set as fast on unbroken rushes as on a sandbank. Here it was impossible to strike out with the oars, and only by pushing herself off with her hands from one clump of bulrushes to another did she at length get into open water. The boat was instantly caught by a couple of eddies and spun round in a circle. Clenching her teeth, Hertha steered herself with the handle of the oar. Her chest expanded, the blood hammered in her veins, a feverish vapour swam before her eyes. With every stroke of the oars she felt a portion of her life's strength flow out. But what did it matter? The boat was being mastered; it was making progress.

And by degrees the tumult in her blood subsided; the muscles, instead of slackening, became hard as steel. She dared look round and measure the distance she had come. The Isle of Friendship greeted her with its masses of golden-brown foliage, from which whirled swarms of falling leaves. A cry of hopeful longing escaped her breast; but she must look out, or another eddy would catch the boat. Ten minutes might have passed, when two withered leaves fluttered over her head and sank like tired birds of passage swimming on to the water.

She gave a deep sigh of satisfaction, for she knew that these leaves were envoys that the Isle of Friendship had sent to meet her. And now when she looked round she found that she was within the shadow of its willows.

One more bitter fight with the current, and with a last far-reaching stroke of the oars she shot into the little bay, whose sandy landing-place was quite under water, so that the boat was able to drift right in amongst the alder roots. With a rapid movement she slung the chain round the strongest of the stumps, fastened it firmly, and swung herself, by clinging to an overhanging branch, on to the steep slippery bank.

For a moment she crouched down on the drenched grass to recover breath, and looked at her blistered palms, which were bleeding. She wiped the blood away with her tongue, and laughed. Then she threw a frightened glance into the thicket where ruddy sunlight lay on the yellow leaves.

The brook which ran down to the river tossed dirty grey rain-water over the slimy stones, between which were heaped stacks of dead damp leaves. The tongues of fern growing along the edge of the water were nipped and shrivelled up, and they looked as they stood there like little wrinkled old women in their blurred brown rags. Not far off were a greasy company of toadstools spreading their smooth copula-shaped heads, delicately fluted underneath. They shone as if they had been rolling in butter.

In disgust at these rotting excrescences of damp weather, Hertha strode over them and struck into the thick of the thorny shrubs, which sorely thwarted her progress. Everywhere brambles, hung with rain-drops like chains of pearls, switched her in the face, and her footmarks on the swampy moss, into which she sank, became glittering pools as she walked on.

It was a path along which the enchanted princesses of fairy tale might have wandered; but she was not in the least afraid, and when she saw a cluster of blue-black sloeberries glistening at her feet, she stooped and gathered them carefully in the palm of her hand.

At last the clearing lay before her, bathed in the purple rays of the sinking sun. She paused, filled with reverent awe, and looked round her.

The evening shadows had gathered over the little temple, and the wind-tossed branches scattered upon it their burden of fading leaves. There was a sighing and moaning in the air, as if the whole army of spirits with whom the legends of the neighbourhood populated the wood were assembled on this very spot. And there on the edge of the boscage was the old sacrificial stone, standing like an altar ready for a new offering of blood.

A cold shiver began to creep over her, but she suppressed it

quickly. Let those who were cowards or who had guilty consciences be afraid. She stood still in front of the temple of friendship, and gazed up in astonishment at the sandstone figures.

"Which of the two is meant for Leo?" she wondered, and for the first time she fully realised the great wrong which was being done the man called Ulrich. The thought made her uneasy, and the longer she dwelt on it the blacker were the depths of depravity that it seemed to reach.

She turned her back, for she could no longer bear the sight of the two friends with their arms twined round each other. "One is a liar," she murmured to herself; and she felt just then as if all truth and good faith had vanished from the world—as if even yonder sun was a monstrous blood-red lie.

"No, no," she thought further; "it is impossible. He must have told him, and have said, 'I love your wife, but it is of no consequence. I only want to see her now and then, and listen to her voice—nothing more.'"

Of course, that was how it was. It couldn't—simply couldn't be otherwise. And she herself wanted nothing more than to see *him* sometimes, and to win a friendly word from him. Truly she had wanted more—once. She had wanted to marry him. . . . At least, a short time ago she had. But now, of course, that was all over and done with. She had renounced him.

Her heart swelled. She ran round the old stone several times, then sat down on top of it and cried bitterly.

As she folded her hands to pray she saw the blood gushing forth. "How stupid I was this morning," she thought, "when I thought that I should have to open one of my veins on this stone, as if I couldn't pour out my heart's blood for him without doing that."

And tucking her feet beneath her body, she began to pray out loud, while the tears rolled into her mouth.

"Dear God, it is all over now. . . . My hopes and my happiness are wrecked. Therefore I beseech Thee from the bottom of my heart to give me strength at least to make others happy. And if I renounce, let me do so without envy, anger, or bitterness. Endow me with that true Christian humility and gentleness that Elly has in such a high degree, so that I may curb my dreadfully hot temper, and not say horrid things to those I love. And above all, I pray Thee for one thing: if he loves her, spare him the endless suffering that I endure because of him. Let him be as happy as it is possible for him to be in his unhappy love. And especially guard him from playing the liar to Ulrich, so that I need not be ashamed unto death for him. Take Frau Felicitas too under your protection, and let all men, whether they be good or bad, enjoy Thy grace so that at last they shall all come to eternal bliss. Amen!"

She repeated the "Amen" three times, and asked herself if there was any enemy or evil-doer for whom she had forgotten to pray, but none occurred to her.

Her heart was now so overflowing with love and forgiveness that she didn't know how she could be thankful enough.

The sun had gone down. A last red glow of light touched the corners of the temple, and gilded the blue-black autumn clouds that gathered in threatening masses on the horizon. Hertha climbed down from the stone, ate the blackberries which she had put down beside her, and thought of her journey home with some anxiety.

A bird of prey flew across the river with a thundering flap of its wings, and then soared as straight as a dart towards the clouds. Its plumage seemed to flash. The wind shook the grasses. All at once it grew dark.

"Farewell," said Hertha, looking back at the pair of friends. "I'll come again in the spring."

Suddenly she started in terror. She heard a crackling and snapping of twigs among the bushes, which drew nearer and nearer.

"A robber," thought Hertha, and laid her hand on her beating heart.

Erect she stood there, turning a courageous face to the approaching danger.

The figure of a man came in view on the edge of the clearing. Hertha felt her blood run cold. It was Leo. He hurried towards her with his firm stride. The veins stood out on his forehead; his eyes flashed fire.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

She was silent and bit her lips, feeling all her meekness depart at one blow.

"Have you taken leave of your senses? Didn't I forbid you to row here alone, and the stream swollen too."

Hertha began to boil inwardly. Was this the reward of her renunciation? But "have patience, be silent," a voice cried within her.

"It's a marvel that you haven't been carried away," he scolded on, all his anxiety for her turning into wrath. "When I forbid a thing, I have my reasons for doing so, but the devil himself seems to drive you into disobedience, girl. I am not at all inclined to go on a wild-goose chase after you again, I can tell you!"

Ah! that was hard. He scorned that hour which lived in her memory as the most sacred she had known. It was more than hard; it was brutal!

At this moment she hated him so that she felt as if she was almost swooning from the intensity of her emotions. All—all that she had just sworn was forgotten, and with a smile of icy contempt, hardly knowing what she said, she answered—

"You can order and forbid as much as you like. But he who is not honest and does not keep his word himself, can scarcely expect that others will respect and obey him."

The words were spoken. They could not be recalled. Reeling a step forwards, he stared at her dully.

"What—what does that mean?" Every drop of blood had forsaken his face.

"You must know perfectly well what it means;" and she turned to go.

He would have liked to shake her, to question her, and force her to speak. But he had not the courage. It seemed to him that from the lips of this child he had been condemned.

In silence they walked to the landing-place; in silence he rowed her over the stream; in silence they parted. Two who, because they belonged to each other, determined to go through life as enemies.

XXV

THE reconciliation of the two women removed the last obstacle that stood in the way of Leo resuming his old relations with his friend. Nevertheless, things remained as they were.

Leo did his utmost to deceive himself, and yet every fresh meeting afforded him little else but anxiety and nervous oppression of spirit. When he searched his heart honestly, he could not wonder that it was so. Formerly, when he had reviewed his position with an untroubled glance he had taken for granted that the ghost of the past should stand between him and his friend, unless the whole naked, shameless truth should be brought to the light of day and confessed. But that such a confession would be an impossible villainy seemed equally to be taken for granted. So there thus remained no other choice but to perpetrate a not less grave, though less ruinous villainy, *i.e.* to act a lie—the same crooked, cringing, smiling lie, day after day, in the house of the unsuspecting man, and to betray the master and well-beloved at every cock-crow afresh. To keep away now was out of the question. He could in no way have justified such a course. In these short and rainy autumn days it was no longer possible to avoid Felicitas, and he was obliged to own to himself that he no longer wished to avoid her. Those understanding looks which one hour he abhorred consoled him the next, for they were eloquent of sympathy and gratitude.

He would even have liked to be oftener alone with her. For although such interviews meant an amalgam of shame, remorse, slackness, and cynicism, they necessitated no lying. One spoke the truth without restraint, however abominable the subject one talked on might be.

But what was worst of all was the uncertainty about Ulrich's attitude towards him. For a long time he had not been sure how to interpret it. He kept vigilant watch on his friend's ever-varying expression, as if to ascertain whether he had guessed anything since they last met, and so the flow of easy and natural converse dried up in his throat. Whatever he did, he was tormented by the probability of Ulrich having gathered from his intercourse with Felicitas some

hint that roused his suspicions; he might, by the process of putting two and two together, and by recalling and comparing incidents, be drawing conclusions and nearing the discovery of the hideous truth. So absorbed was he by the idea, that sometimes it seemed to him almost inconceivable that Ulrich should not have drawn such conclusions, and there were certain hours when he firmly believed that his friend's geniality was a mere mask, which he assumed to draw him into a trap.

He measured anxiously the warmth of each hand-shake with which Ulrich welcomed him, and if he noticed that his eyes were resting on him thoughtfully, his blood would mount hotly to his brow, and the figure of his friend swim before him in a mist.

One evening, in the middle of October, Ulrich received him at the portico with the words—

"Come into my study; I want to have a talk with you."

The tone in which he said this was one of suspicious solemnity, and Leo felt his heart sink. He was almost convinced now that the hour of explanation had sounded.

"I'll put a bullet through my brain before I confess," he thought, while Ulrich closed the door behind them.

His furtive gaze wandered searchingly along the massive black shelves and cupboards which lined the small room, and from which the gold of the bookbindings cast a soft shimmer. Here, amidst periodicals and political pamphlets, microscopes and specimens, his friend spent his leisure; here he robbed his nights of sleep in ceaseless and indefatigable study. Leo felt as if he must make sure of a weapon, but in this peaceful little kingdom there was nothing of the kind in evidence. Silently he sat down, and confronted his friend with mute hostility.

Ulrich's long figure dropped into the black leather-covered chair at the writing-table, and he pushed the lamp with green shade out of the circuit of his elbow.

"Now listen," he began. "The question that I am going to ask has become unavoidable, for we can't go on like this. Something is wrong with you . . . No; don't contradict me. We have known each other as long as we can remember, but I have never seen you like this before."

Leo choked back his answer with a hoarse laugh.

"Shall I enumerate all the changes in you on my fingers?" continued Ulrich. "I think it is hardly necessary. At all events, you are concealing something from me, and I have been wondering for a long time what it can be. I have made a note of every possibility, and weighed each according to a strictly logical system. I have weeded out the most nonsensical, and now two eventualities have remained. The first is need of money."

Leo would have hastily agreed, so as to leave no room for the second supposition, but he foresaw what the consequences would be, and was silent.

Ulrich's eyes rested on him in burning solicitude. He tugged at his thin beard, awaiting an answer, shook his head, and then continued. "But I say to myself that my light-hearted comrade of old would never let himself be depressed by such cares, . . . and, besides, it would be a breach of faith of the worst sort if he was uneasy for a minute about money, so long as my cheque-book contains in it an unwritten page. It's true, I hope, that you would never do me such a wrong?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Leo, and looked as if he were about to seize his friend's hand, but his courage failed him.

"You'll swear it?"

"Yes, of course! I swear it," he replied.

One falsehood more or less signified little now. He knew that he would rather cut off his right hand than take a single farthing from the hand that now lay cold and gentle in his.

"And then I say to myself," went on Ulrich, "a man who was born to laugh and be merry doesn't become moody and despondent for nothing. If it's not debts that prey on him, it is guilt."

Leo passed his hand over his forehead and withdrew it damp. "And what may the guilt be?" he asked, trying to laugh.

"Yes, I have asked myself that question too. What can it be, when he is afraid to speak of it to me? And I have argued further, it must be something that he fears to pain me by confessing, otherwise his silence would have no motive. It must be, therefore, something in which I am myself concerned."

Leo, half risen, clung to the arms of his chair. He was extremely upset.

"I am as transparent as glass to him," he thought.

Only Ulrich's friendly, almost mournful calmness still remained a riddle to him. And this calmness restrained him, else would he have sought before to save himself from what was coming.

"I set myself the task of inquiring into the past," Ulrich continued. "I ransacked your life back to its earliest youth. I found scrapes, and even intrigues, in plenty; but of actual wrong-doing nothing till . . . up to——"

"What?"

"Your duel with Rhaden."

Leo felt a sensation of something to which he had been clinging giving way within him. With a tired sigh he sank against the back of the chair.

Ulrich leaned over and put his hand on his knee. "Don't try to hide it from me any more," he said. "I see too plainly that I have

hit the mark. You would be made of stone and iron if the sight of her who was once his wife did not perpetually remind you of the fact that it is no light or ordinary matter to shoot down like a wild beast, some one who has injured our *amour propre*, or to let ourselves be so shot down."

"What could I do?" stammered Leo again, without a conception of what his friend was driving at.

"A reconciliation ought to have been patched up. That is to say, don't misunderstand me, I am not blaming you. It would not become me to do so, as I myself was more to blame than you."

"*You* to blame!"

"Undoubtedly. I was the mediator. I should also have been the peacemaker. And to this day it's a mystery to me that I couldn't manage to avert the consequences of that foolish dispute. . . . I made bad use of my official opportunity. Rhaden should have been compelled to recall the expression 'unfair,' for it's clear that he only let it escape him in the excitement of the moment. I have judged myself severely enough. I will confess to you that I ask myself sometimes, 'Were you justified in marrying the wife of a man in whose death you had a hand?' Scruples, perhaps of a somewhat pedantic conscience, and only you have the right to reproach me for it."

"Reproach! I?" exclaimed Leo, who at last slowly grasped that this abstruse dreamer, with his punctilious sense of justice, was trying to fasten on himself a guilty responsibility out of his altogether fairy-like version of the facts. Ah, if he only knew!

"Yes, my dear boy," Ulrich went on, "don't conceal from me what you think of my conduct, from false sentiments. I am guilty, and I alone. This house should be as much your home as Halewitz. And I ought not to have allowed even the most insane love to prevail upon me to bring a wife here who would so constantly remind you of that untoward event. Not that she knows or wishes it. For she has so thoroughly forgiven you that sometimes I wonder how such a power of forgiving and forgetting can exist on earth. It appears to me like unfaithfulness to the father of her child, and above all"—a faint flush passed over his face, and he turned away to master his emotion—"above all it seems a wrong to the child himself. You see that all this brooding reflection has made me both bitter and unjust, for, after all, I am only reproaching her with her devotion to me and her desire to promote my happiness. Alone through the completeness of her pardon has it been possible for me to stand before you in any other light than as a traitor to our friendship, although God knows I have enough for which to claim your forbearance."

"Ulrich, I can't stand this!" cried Leo, jumping to his feet.

"What can't you stand?" replied the other, in the tolerant, considerate tone in which people speak to impetuous, headstrong children. "My willingness to take half the burden of your trouble on my own shoulders? I tell you it belongs to me, old boy. It is my privilege, and I demand it. And if there was such a thing as rendering accounts in friendship, I would say that I stand so deep in your debt that I don't see how a tolerable balance can ever be restored. Don't snort, and stride about the room at that mad pace. You know I hate it. There, now, drop all superfluous considerations out of regard for me, and be open with me in future. We two get on best when we tell each other everything, even when it hurts; anything better than sparing each other's feelings by setting up a barrier of shy reserve."

Leo made an inarticulate exclamation, and stood in front of his friend, with his shoulders squared. At that moment he resolved to tell all. A hunger for truth worked so powerfully in his soul that he would have thought it cheaply purchased at the price of death itself.

But almost immediately after, a voice cried within him, "It would be madness, and it may lead to murder."

So he fell back silently into his armchair. The twilight which reigned in the neighbourhood of the lamp-shade prevented his agitation from being visible, otherwise it must have betrayed him.

"And one thing more, my boy," Ulrich went on again. "For a long time I have had something to thank you for, which has been weighing heavily on my mind."

"Still thanking me!" thought Leo, with an outbreak of unholy humour which was next door to despair.

"You ought to know it, because I am sure that it will give you pleasure. You have been the good angel of my house. No, don't deny it. It's a fact. It looks as if you know devilish well how to manage women. Then it is almost incredible how Felicitas has changed for the better since you have been coming here frequently. You would not look at me in such astonishment, if you knew what she had been before. All that folly with the boys of the neighbourhood is past and over. Not long ago I referred to it in joke, and she threw her arms round my neck and implored me with tears in her eyes never to speak of it. She lives a domestic life, and tries to interest and busy herself in the house. Her fantastic vagaries have entirely vanished. She has given up crying for no cause. She is much more composed and dignified in her views, and doesn't live now on nothing but marmalade and Madeira; and what is my chief solace of all—I won't keep it from you, for you will rejoice in her happiness, knowing how unhappy I was—she no longer locks my door."

A spasm of repulsion shot through Leo's breast, which he attributed to shame at this undeserved confidence, and tried to combat. Then something like a genuine feeling of happiness dawned in his soul. He drew a deep breath, and pressed his friend's hand. After all there had been no foundation for his anxiety. While he had been suffering and wrestling with himself, his object, unknown to himself, had been fulfilled. Perhaps things were not so bad as they had seemed; . . . perhaps there was still hope, even for him too.

XXVI

THE soothing effect of this conversation lasted several days, and then went off completely. His friend's blind trust became torture to him. Much as he had feared his suspicion, now an atom of uncertainty would have seemed a positive consolation, and have placed his crime within the range of human possibilities. Amongst the premises which Ulrich, according to his own words, had rejected as untenable, Leo's love for Felicitas had in all probability found a place. His friend could not easily have overlooked it in his logical inquiry, but the pure nobility of his unsuspicious heart had at once annihilated the evidence which his acutely reasoning mind had built up.

There were moments when he could almost have hated him for this. Had Ulrich been more mistrustful before his marriage, the whole ill-omened business might have turned out differently.

The more he thought over the change in Lizzie, and the new relations with her which at first had promised so happily, the more disquieted he became inwardly. If it was true that she no longer cared for him, how was the powerful influence that he exercised over her to be accounted for?

He dared not follow the line of argument further, but his thoughts hovered about the dangerous ground, as wild beasts prowl round a night-fire.

His only comfort in these troubles was the management of the estate. He felt that if there was any salvation for him, he must find it in work. He would work till all his muscles relaxed, and he came near death's door. And of work to be done, there was enough in all conscience.

October is a heavy month in the districts where beet-root is cultivated. The process of harvest demands the severest vigilance, for the labourers, in order to make more rapid progress, are fond of tearing the roots out of the ground and freeing them of the clinging earth by beating them violently together. Two cardinal errors, because the slightest flaw in the root lowers its sugar-producing value. The next stage of moving the crop as quickly as possible to the nearest export station is attended with even more labour and trouble.

In the small hours of the morning, long before the first gleam of dawn had crept across the level landscape, what had been dug out of the earth the day before was smartened up and piled on to the waggons, which in slow procession journeyed to Münsterberg, where the beet-roots were packed for the railway transit. It was a long and difficult route; especially the crossing of the river was apt to involve a thousand delays and mishaps, whereby much precious time was lost. And Leo did not shirk the arduous task of superintending the transit in person, a task which the most conscientious of bailiffs would willingly have shunted on to the shoulders of others. So there was much jeering astonishment in the district at the unheard-of spectacle of a high-born landed proprietor appearing on the scene before six o'clock in the morning. Those were fine, strenuous days, with a satisfying record of countless duties achieved.

At five minutes to three the watchman's pole tapped on his window-pane, a dreadful moment, but how could it be helped? On the stroke of three the shutters must be opened as a sign to the watchman that he was up, otherwise that official had orders to hunt his master out of bed with a douche of cold water. Twenty minutes later he was in the saddle.

Night and silence still reigned in the castle, only Christian, who despite the burden of years would not relinquish the service of himself mixing the "Gnädiger Herr's" warm cognac, stood with lamp and taper in the doorway, and greeted him with a tremulous "Good morning."

Then followed a smart gallop to the fields, where the work-people already nervously awaited him. Their lanterns flashing out of the darkness showed him the way. A sonorous morning greeting, returned by a chorus of voices; a rapid survey of the waggons; a few *donner wetters!* in addition—for in German country places no workman feels at home unless he is sworn at—and then, amidst a tremendous din, the procession of waggons heavily, but withal adroitly, got under way.

Half an hour later, they drew up at the Wengern ferry. The black river lay there in the darkness, yawning and gurgling like a huge monster gifted with invisible and destructive life. Over it the wind whistled and sighed, although not a twig stirred on the plains. The ferry-raft oscillated, the horses neighed anxiously, confused cries and words of command rang out through the air. The heavily loaded waggons rumbled, amidst the cracking of whips and rattling harness, down the precipitous decline of the dyke, as if they were bound to roll headlong into the abyss. They got on to the shaking landing-stage, where the bar brought the horses to a halt, and these swerved to one side in their nervousness, and tried to bite each other's flanks. The ferry could take ten at a time, the rest had to wait for the second

journey. A curious feeling of panic seized Leo every time the rope slackened and the pulleys began to work. He rode up and down the bank and watched the fleet embark. It seemed to glide into space, and was swallowed up in darkness. Only the reflection of the lanterns made trembling threads of light across the black water. On the other side of the ferry the train divided, for it would have been a waste of time for the first relay to await the second.

When the last waggon had crossed, Leo's enjoyment began. He loosened the curb, in order to gallop the quicker after the receding carts. His limbs, numb from cold or wet, thawed, a tingling sensation of welcome warmth pervaded his body and winged his thoughts. So long as the race lasted, all trouble was forgotten. The early morning cramp of worry—a symptom which once had been unknown to his robust physique—grew less, and finally disappeared. The first suggestion of light that lay on the earth—dreamy and full of promise—found for a few moments a reflection in his soul.

With the rosy dawn, the first waggon made its entry into Münsterberg, and drew up at the station shed, near which was the great pair of scales. A tedious hour of wrangling and counting followed. Then he turned his face towards home. And in the castle dining-room, when grandmamma called the children to coffee, Leo made his appearance, too.

Sometimes he was covered with dust, sometimes drenched with rain. With clattering of spurs, and amidst barking of dogs, he would come into the room, and with a weary "Good morning," hurl his cap into a corner.

His day's work only began now in earnest, and when he entered his bedroom at night, he dropped into a chair as if felled by a sudden blow. Often he could scarcely find the strength to undress, and two or three times the pitiless pole had tapped and surprised him still sitting at his table, with flushed face and smoking lamp.

There was little time left for visits to Uhlenfelde, and Leo felt happy at having a valid pretext for excusing himself. Yet it seemed to him scarcely right to avoid meeting Felicitas alone. She might ask why he had been untrue to his word? She had a certain claim to his society, and he began, too, to be devoured with a longing to see and converse with her without Ulrich being present. He hoped for a favourable opportunity, such as the last had been, but it did not occur. So he counted, with a beating heart, the hours till he should be certain of Ulrich's absence, and meanwhile he stayed at home.

Then came an evening when the representatives of the Agricultural Association were holding their monthly meeting in Münsterberg, and he, no longer able to restrain himself, started with a kind of sad defiance for Uhlenfelde.

It was dark when he landed on the opposite bank. The wind was boisterous and cold, and he felt half frozen. Old Minna met him in the vestibule, the factotum of the old love intrigue, whose mediating offices he recalled with a shudder.

She explained to him, blinking and nodding, that the gracious little mistress wasn't well; that the gracious little mistress was suffering from cramp of the heart, but, nevertheless, the gracious one would receive him.

The familiarity with which the toothless, clapping mouth smirked up at him was revolting, and still more revolting was it that he found himself smiling back at her. But it was necessary to keep on good terms with her. Was she not an accomplice?

Shuddering, he hardly knew whether from cold or excitement, he paced up and down between the pillars. It was some time before the old hag returned.

The gracious little mistress had been lying down, but begged him to wait a few minutes. She would make her toilette as quickly as possible, that was to say, not completely, because such old friends needn't stand on ceremony with each other.

Leo compressed his lips. Had she chosen to be more explicit still, he must have endured it.

In Lizzie's sanctum, two lamps with rose-coloured shades were burning. Cushions and rugs were scattered about in confusion on the couch, as if some one had a moment before disturbed them by hastily jumping up. An open book lay face downwards on the carpet. He picked it up. The title was "The Golden Road to Virtue: Experiences of a Sinner."

He began to turn over the leaves haphazard. In the highly coloured style of a tract, a newly converted sinner related her marvellous rescue from vice with a sort of coquettish fervour, which made him fancy he saw the play of uplifted eyes with which this drawing-room Magdalene sought to lure the Saviour, like another lover, into her net. But from Leo, the Goth who since his school-days had read the very worst literature, even such trash as this wrung a certain unwilling respect.

"She is doing her best according to her lights," he thought, and laid the book down with care. Yes, she was in earnest.

When she entered the room, he noticed at once the dark rims which pain had left round her eyes, and the paleness of her lips.

And yet she had never seemed to him more beautiful. She wore a careless artistic *negligée* of blue cashmere, bordered with creamy lace, which accumulated on her breast into a filmy cloud. Her hair, only simply dressed, curled in countless small rings over brow and cheeks, and was massed on the crown of her head into a knot of curls, which was surrounded by a double circlet of gold. Leo

remembered to have seen such heads in picture-galleries, bathed in golden tints and standing out in relief against a purple half-light, as if emerging from some background of mystery.

"You have been suffering?" he exclaimed, extending both hands towards her.

"I? Who told you so?" she replied, with a tired smile, as she sank into an easy-chair.

"Minna told me."

Instead of answering, she lifted her eyebrows languidly, and stretched out a limp hand for a cushion to support her neck. She must have just been scenting herself, for her person exhaled the opoponax perfume more overpoweringly than ever.

Leo felt signs already of the enervating stupefaction which always took possession of his brain in this atmosphere. It began like a slight pressure on the temples, spreading to his forehead, and finally encompassing his whole head with iron spans.

Felicitas buried her face in the hollow of her supporting arm and remained motionless.

"Good God! What ails you?" he demanded.

She raised her head slightly, and smiled at him hopelessly.

"What ails me, Leo? I wish that I had never been born. That's all."

"A pious wish, at least," he answered, with an unsuccessful attempt to sneer. "Now tell me frankly, Lizzie," he exhorted, "why do you rave against yourself like this? There is no sense in it. Tell me—why?"

"Because I am learning to repent."

A spasm shot through him, as if he were about to make an effort to protest against the word, but he no longer had the power. The life that he had been leading for the last two months had been nothing but a vain struggle against self-reproach and repentance. Hence the wrecking of his whole character. He got up, and in silence paced with unsteady steps the rosy, dimly lighted boudoir. Then he came close to her and leant against the edge of her chair.

She looked up at him with plaintive eyes; then, sighing deeply, pressed her face against his arm.

He would have drawn back, but he did not wish her to see that he thought this contact less harmless than she did.

"Leo, I suffer unspeakable agony," she whispered.

He drew his arm away from her abruptly, and sat down opposite her.

"So all the happiness you are giving Ulrich," he asked, "is nothing but a delusion and a sham?"

"Do you expect me to make it a reality?"

"I expect nothing. I only wish—I . . ." He could not go

on. His thoughts moved tardily, clumsily. He only knew that her astonished, resentful question had not displeased him so much as it ought to have done.

"The promise I made you," she continued, "I have honestly kept to the best of my ability. I have tried to be a good housewife, worthy of him, a wife of whom he need not be ashamed. But the penance I have imposed on myself is terrible. I suffer tortures that no man can have any idea of."

"And do you imagine that I am lying on a bed of roses?" he responded.

"You! What do you want?"

Then he burst forth. "I? Ah, woman, little do you know what I endure. I am in torment; I appear to myself polluted from head to foot. I scarcely know how to look honest people in the face. I think every one is pointing the finger of scorn at me. If it goes on like this, I must go out of my mind. Isn't that bad enough?"

She let her eyes rest on him full of curiosity. . . . Something like stealthy joy shone in them, for since the long, long ago he had never poured out to her such confidences, from the depths of his being.

"Can I help you?" she murmured.

He laughed stridently.

"Oh, please, Leo!"

"Don't talk of your helping," he answered; "help from your side would be only a fresh crime. Besides, how could you? Only one person can help me, and that is Ulrich."

"For God's sake!" she cried out, "you are not thinking of——"

"Calm yourself," he made answer. "I know what I owe you. We two are yoked together. . . . We are both bound to hold our tongues; that is an understood thing."

There was a pause. Then Felicitas asked in a trembling voice—

"Can you pray, Leo?"

He gazed at her in shocked amazement. "Pray, indeed! It's well for those who can. But I have sneaked out of the Almighty's way, like my dog Leo sneaks out of my way when he has torn a fowl to pieces."

"You ought to try," she said, with her most pious expression. "It has done wonders for me lately. . . . I confide all my yearning to the merciful ear of the Saviour, and——"

"Yearning? Yearning for what?" he asked.

She smiled in confusion. "Really, you ought to pray," she repeated.

"Indeed!"

"Perhaps our Lord is only inflicting this trial on us as a test of

our faith, and we shall come through it glorified. It may be that it is part of His system of salvation to——"

"Tell me," he broke in, aghast, "have you been calling on Brenckenberg?"

"God forbid!" she cried. "I am horribly afraid of him."

"Or perhaps on Johanna?"

"No," she answered, colouring; "Johanna has been to see me."

"Ah, indeed."

"Don't be so hard. I bless the day that led me to her arms, for she has shown me the way to the Cross."

"How often has she been here?"

"Three times."

"And you have made yourself over to her body and soul?"

She shook her head with a smile. "I have only done that for one person in the world," she said. "There is much that I cannot speak of to her, but her influence has been of infinite benefit to me."

He gazed before him meditatively.

She rose and came close to his chair. "Do you know, Leo," she said, with a dreamy smile, "it would be so nice if we prayed together."

"What do you mean?"

She was embarrassed. "I mean, if we took our common trouble to the Father. . . ."

"Heavens! You think that would improve matters?"

She sighed. "It would be so beautiful," she whispered.

"How do you propose to do it?" he asked. "Shall we kneel down side by side on the carpet?"

She half laughed, and flushed deeper. "You are a heathen," she pouted, sitting down again, "and scoff at the most sacred things."

"Make your mind easy, dear child," he said seriously. "I have long ago lost the humour for scoffing."

"Well, then, you can at least pray for me, as I pray for you."

"Do you really do that?" he asked, while a feeling of gratitude stirred gently within him.

She nodded shamefacedly, and cast her eyes on her lap. "It is the utmost I can do," she murmured.

Again there was silence. Their eyes met and rested in each other's depths. A sweet, silent sympathy seemed to hover between them like a mysterious vapour. At this moment Leo did not feel the chafing of his chains. The thoughts of both went back to their past.

"We were too happy," breathed Felicitas, "that is why we must suffer so much now."

He did not answer. After the manner of man, he retained less grateful remembrances than she did of the bliss that had been theirs.

She became doubtful. "Or perhaps you were not happy?" she asked.

He nodded, for, against his will, he was falling a victim to old memories.

She gazed at him with fixed eyes, her hands pressed hard against her forehead.

"Why did things turn out so?" she whispered. "Why could we not be strong, and resist the temptation?"

"Why? There is no 'why' in the matter. We were young and hot-headed and foolish, and we thought of nothing. . . . I, for my part, wonder now how I could have seemed so sagacious to myself, and not cried out to the whole world, 'See, what a dog I am. I have an affair with a woman . . . a married woman!'"

"But at first, in the beginning . . . how did you feel?" she asked.

"What? In the beginning?"

"When you . . . first . . . guessed my love."

"When . . . ah, you mean that night?"

"Do you still remember it?" she asked, leaning over to him. A pink flame leapt up in her cheeks, her glance swam in dreamy reminiscence.

"How can such things be forgotten?" he replied, frowning and smiling at the same time. "One must carry them to the grave."

"And as you rode home . . . that night . . . what did you think about?"

"You are always asking what I thought," he answered, while visions of that hour mounted to his brain and made him hot. "I rode on and on, as if I were drunk. Every moment I expected to fall out of the saddle. And when I came to my own meadows, I drew in the roan. You remember it was the old roan then, with the white feet. I tethered him to a meadow-hurdle, and flung myself on the grass. It must have been nearly two o'clock, but it was a very close, sultry night; just a streak of red dawn was already in the sky. There I lay, asking myself, 'Is it possible? Can you really have experienced it? Are there such hours to be lived on earth?' And the roan grazed all the time, and round about was the new-mown hay. That got into one's senses, ay, it was enough to drive one mad. . . ."

A soft cry escaped her lips. She had thrown her head back over the side of the chair, the blue veins stood out on her throat, her breast heaved tumultuously, and, with both hands pressed to her heart, she lay gasping for breath.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked, in much concern, for he feared a repetition of that scene.

"Nothing—nothing. It is only my stupid heart, nothing else."

"Can't I get you anything?"

"Thank you. It will soon be better . . . it is better now."

She sat up, and, as if to allay his fears, smiled mechanically into vacancy. Then she began to talk to herself, as if in a dream.

"And I . . . I see it all before me still. . . . When you were gone . . . I went to the window . . . and listened . . . to your footsteps in the garden; the horse neighed from the hedge . . . it saw you coming . . . and then there was a sound of hoofs, echoing softly . . . and then all was quiet."

"And you had no qualms of conscience?"

She shook her head with a blissful smile, setting the waves and curls of her hair in motion so that they whipped her over cheek and throat. Then, recollecting how serious this question was, she knitted her brows and grasped her temples with both hands.

"In those days," she said dully, "I had no notion of what conscience meant; in those days I let my sinful happiness carry me along joyously to the edge of an abyss without reflecting. That night, in my ecstasy, I tore my clothes from my body. . . ."

Suddenly she paused, shocked at herself. Her fingers, which had been fumbling at her throat, had caught in the cloud of lace. With a thin, long-drawn, tearing sound some thread of the delicate fabric collapsed. She smiled at him in dismay. Then she quickly turned the situation off with a jest.

"That is a pity," she said. "It is real old Flemish."

Daintily she knotted the ends together again. "Is that all right?" she asked.

He did not answer.

A fresh silence took paralysing possession of the pair. Their glance wandered away, as if they no longer dared meet one another's eyes. She, with flushed cheeks, gazed at the toe of her embroidered Turkish slipper, which with its gold arabesques shone forth from the hem of her blue cashmere gown. He gnawed his moustache, and stared up at the ceiling. The oil in the two lamps hissed and hummed. With a subdued murmur the wind caressed the window-panes in passing. The clock ticked melodiously; it was a sound like a rain-drop falling at regular intervals on the strings of a harp.

Leo felt a speechless fury boiling within him. He wanted to move, but could not stir. At last he made a violent effort to regain his manliness.

"Why do we grope about in the past?" he asked, jumping to his feet. "It can lead to no good."

"It helps us to forget the misery of the present. Isn't that some good?" she replied.

He did not contradict her, and turned to go. But in parting he caught hold of her in a sudden spasm of rage, shook her hither and thither, and, burying his fingers in the elastic flesh of her upper arm, he bent down and muttered in her ear—

"You are right. . . . We *will* pray."

XXVII

THE beginning of winter found everything the same as usual at the Parsonage. The Candidate had not succeeded in raising the money for the continuation of his studies. He therefore was preparing calmly to spend the winter term under the paternal roof.

He decided to employ the many hours of leisure which stretched before him, in settling on authorship as his calling in life, and to write an epoch-making work, which would raise him with one bound to the highest pinnacle of fame. The work was to be of a scientific character, and to give shape and method to the floating chaotic ideas of modernity.

A public career lay open to him also. All you had to do to be elected to the Reichstag, was to sit down and write a few social pamphlets on prostitution, or the duel question; and if the ministry did not see its way after that to give you an appointment, you must become active in opposition, not that miserable half-hearted opposition of abortive Liberalism, but the firebrand kind of Lassalles, which bore upon it the imprint of genius, and left plenty of time over for love adventures.

Altogether it had been easier for an Oswald Stein. In those days, as an adherent of the Sturm and Drang party, one knew what to be at. To cut a path for freedom from the barricades, and then get hewn down by the truncheons of tyranny. But since the seventies there had been no tyrants; and people no longer stirred up revolutions. It was considered neither gentlemanly nor "modern."

The only consolation that he found in this whirling chaos of emotions was love. For Kurt loved and was beloved! The blessed knowledge had been conveyed to him in a gilt-edged note sealed by a rosebud, the sort of stationery affected by very young ladies. One day at the end of September it had been delivered to him by the goose-herd at the farm and had run as follows—

"DEAR HERR KANDIDAT,

"The song 'Smiling Stars,' which you dedicated to me, is quite charming. Unfortunately my brother took it away from me

before I got hold of it. I must warn you against my brother, for he is very angry with you; and I am rather afraid he may challenge you. That would be so awful, I think it would kill me. I beg of you, therefore, not to send me any more poems; or if you do, please don't address them to Halewitz. On the road between Halewitz and Wengern there are some milestones with figures on them. The stone that I mean has the figures 24 on it. Will you please bury your poems in the earth behind the stone, and as a sign that you have buried them make a little cross out of twigs, and stick it up in front of the stone. Then I should know directly when I come by. And I entreat you to keep this a secret till your dying day, for I am strictly watched. Even Hertha keeps a look-out on me—ah, it is dreadful.

"With kind regards,

"Yours sincerely,

"E. v. S.

"P.S.—Please do it soon."

This was the beginning of a lively correspondence between Elly and the Candidate, which was conducted partly in verse and partly in prose, and left nothing to be desired in fire and ardour.

Kurt's opinion of himself rose tremendously under its influence. Oswald Stein now had the advantage of him in nothing. In case Melitta—that was to say, Felicitas—persisted in scorning him, at least the little fair girl, who was so madly in love with him, still remained. He had forgotten her name in the book, but he would call her "Elly" for the nonce.

Elly's sentimental scrawls provided him with enough amusement to kill time. They alternated between poetic gush, such as one finds in novels, and comical outbursts of alarm. "Myrtle wreaths," "the song of the nightingale," and "starlit spheres," were phrases as numerous as "stabs of conscience," "suicide and desperation." Twice already she had implored him to end the correspondence, and to set her free; but there was always a fresh communication behind the milestone.

Kurt was amply employed in consoling and encouraging her, and forecasting the golden time when they would be united for ever. Seriously he had no hopes of anything of the kind happening. It was not likely the proud clod of a squire would be so good-natured and accommodating as to lay his still half-baby youngest sister in Kurt's arms; and it would be derogatory for a man of his talent and prospects to take her without leave, and hamper himself with an unprofitable bride. He had difficulties enough to contend with without that.

His old father (set up to it, probably) was beginning to cast a

disapproving eye on his son's manner of life, and veiled allusions concerning "the lilies of the field," and "loaves and fishes," made him feel very uncomfortable. One day in the middle of October the bomb burst.

Kurt, who had reposed till eleven in bed, feeling the necessity of a little light refreshment before the midday meal, went on a foraging expedition to the cupboard, the place where one would naturally expect to find a miscellaneous assortment of ham, pickled eels, cold roast veal, cold fried potatoes, and mashed turnips. He was interrupted in the business of choosing between these dainties by the old pastor, who laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, and asked whether he intended to make it his vocation for the rest of his life to eat up all the remains of the family meals.

Kurt assumed the air of an offended prince. "A man must live," he replied loftily, "or do you wish to imply——"

"Come to my study," broke in the old man.

"Very well," said Kurt, wiping his mouth. "You are my father, so I must obey you." And he made a sign to show that he bowed to the paternal authority.

"Come, now, we will speak in plain language, my boy," the old fellow began, sinking into his shabby, cushioned chair. "In all my days I have never come across such a cursed jackanapes as you are. You drink like a fish, swagger and bully like a sergeant-major—all very well, and most pleasing to me. But do you think that you can go on loafing *infinitum?*"

Kurt controlled his resentment with difficulty.

"I don't understand, father," he said, "how you can call it loafing. Periods of inactive development are as necessary to the mind as the winter-time of hibernating is to Nature. While I am to all appearances idle, I work incessantly at my individuality. I cultivate my manhood; my personality is maturing. That is worth more than any book learning."

"Very well, my son," the old man replied. "Don't be discouraged. Keep up your calm impudence, and the rest will take care of itself. But, I tell you, for all that the world is a big place. Go and mature your personality somewhere else, and find another hunting-ground for your fads."

"Certainly I would, with pleasure, papa," Kurt replied, "if I had the necessary funds."

"The two months' salary the Baron von Kletzingk gave you would have been enough to live on for a whole term if you had not squandered it. You know that you needn't expect a farthing from me. Get the money as best you can, but remember, in eight days you clear out of this!"

"All right," Kurt replied with dignity, getting up. "I will go to

ruin on the king's highway. But it seems a pity, just as my nature has taken a start, and I begin to be conscious of unsuspected springs of energy within me. But we won't speak about it further. The door of my father's house is to be shut on me—and with justice. Your long-suffering has been boundless, father. I thank you, and I will at once try and raise a little money. Farewell!" And he left the room.

The old man looked after him, shaking his head. "What a young scamp it is!" he said, full of admiration. "I was just such another."

Kurt, filled with bitter feelings, climbed up to the attic. He threw himself on his bed to reflect on his position, and also to await the dinner hour. There was baked ham with dumplings for dinner, —a dish which could be cooked in no university town so excellently as in the parental house. It was sad that the ham came to an end so soon, and that his father announced there would before long be one less to feed at the table.

When Kurt had composed himself a little, he went the round of neighbouring estates to see what was to be done in the money line.

"How brutal it is," he thought, "that a man's fine ambitions should be chased away by sordid cares!" And while he plodded along the rain-drenched country roads, it became clearer than ever that pessimism was the only philosophy of life worthy of consideration. He resolved to air his views in some great work which should take the form either of "Childe Harold" or "The Philosophy of the Unknown."

Grey clouds raced over the sky, the wind whistled across the furrows, and ravens circled weirdly above the dung-hills. Everything was vast and dreary, like his mood.

The proceeds of his first day's crusade was a ten-mark piece, lent by the newly appointed bailiff at Ellernthal—a novel of Zola's, also lent, and a fit of the blues.

The second day he fared no better, and on the third there seemed to be little doubt that his credit for ten miles round had been exhausted. Now he became so utterly disconsolate that he thought of taking his life. But the same day he received a gilt-edged note, which bore a certain family resemblance to Elly's missives, only there was no rosebud. The signature was Hertha von Prachwitz.

"She too?" he thought, and an indescribable feeling of satisfaction ran through his veins.

Hertha urgently requested an interview of ten minutes with him, and named as a place of meeting the churchyard at Wengern, and the hour six in the evening.

"One knows pretty well what those urgent interviews mean," he

thought, twisting his moustache with a smile. After all, any one who was invited to a rendezvous with countesses need not despair.

To dodge those who might spy on his movements, he took a longish walk towards evening, from which he tried to return unobserved, for the churchyard was only a few steps distant from the parsonage.

On the stroke of six he emerged from the shadow of the church porch, and saw Hertha's figure darkly silhouetted in the late twilight as she sat waiting on a tombstone. His heart beat riotously in delighted anticipation. He approached her with his hat in his hand. "What a fascination and charm there must be about my person," he reflected, "if even this haughty highflyer succumbs to it!"

Hertha shot up at sight of him. She wore her old grey cloak, and had drawn the hood over her head and tied it under the chin. She was painfully excited. Her hands clasped the grave railings convulsively. Her eyes flashed in the darkness.

"You will think that this is a strange proceeding, Herr Kandidat," she said, in a trembling voice.

"Oh no, not at all," he assured her with a gallant bow.

"Ordinarily," she went on, "girls like me are not in the habit of appointing to meet people. . . ."

She halted. There was something in her tone which made him feel a trifle less triumphant; it was almost as if she would have said, "people of your position."

"Wait a bit," he thought; "I'll soon bring her down."

"But your stupid conduct to my cousin," she continued, "compels me to speak very seriously to you."

Kurt felt very much as if a bucket of cold water had been hurled at him. It was evident what had happened. Elly had told tales, and Hertha, whether jealous or not, had made up her mind to put obstacles in his way.

"I beg pardon, countess," he said, raising his hand in dignified protest. "This is a matter of a very private nature. I don't know how far and by what means you have gained the confidence of your cousin Fräulein Elly, and I, for my part, cannot flatter myself that I have your confidence; therefore, if you will allow me——"

He raised his hat as a sign that he desired to end the conversation.

"Listen to me, if you please, Herr Kandidat," said Hertha, and her eyes flashed wrathfully. "If you adopt this tone towards me, it will be the worse for you."

"You talk in riddles," he replied, with a smirk.

"I am ready to express myself as plainly as you like," said Hertha. "I have run over here secretly, and at great risk, and

you thought of going away and leaving me in the lurch like a naughty schoolboy."

In his most cavalier style he begged her pardon, and submitted to hear what was coming.

"Why don't you leave my cousin alone?" asked Hertha, measuring him with a scornful eye from head to toe.

"I love Fräulein Elly," he replied, "and I will annihilate all who thwart my love."

"Don't be so impertinent, Herr Kandidat. No one will believe you."

"They shall be made to believe," he said; "when two young hearts love, who shall come between them?"

Hertha shrugged her shoulders. "Elly does not love you, Herr Kandidat," she said.

"I happen to possess proofs to the contrary," he replied, with another polite bow.

"Ah! You mean the silly letters?" asked Hertha. "If she hadn't begun to write them behind my back, I should long ago have put a stop to it. Yesterday she came to me and implored me to save her, and I mean to save her, Herr Kandidat, even if it should cost me my life."

"Save her from what, if I may venture to ask, countess?"

"From you, Herr Kandidat. She has begged you more than once to leave her in peace, and told you that you frightened her. But you have continued, in spite of that, to bombard her with your crazy letters, verses, and stuff. The verses aren't even original, and the rest is all lies. So now you know what I think, Herr Kandidat."

Kurt gnawed his moustache. It seemed as if the prospect of a double defeat lay before him. But he would not lose the battle without a last struggle.

"My good breeding prevents my answering a lady in the tone which you have chosen to adopt towards me. But I should be glad to know why, if your cousin Fräulein Elly holds me in such detestation, and finds my letters so senseless, has she demeaned herself to invite me to enter into a correspondence with her? And why, up to the present, has she not disdained to answer my letters?"

Hertha bit her lips. It was no easy task to defend Elly's folly.

A silence ensued. The autumn wind moaned in the larches, and brought down with every gust a shower of fine prickly rain.

Hertha appeared to herself unspeakably stupid and silly. If she had had her riding-whip, she would have loved to bring it about the ears of the youth, who maintained his dandified air, and was straining every muscle to impress her as a model of gentlemanly forbearance. But it would not have helped matters.

"You don't answer me!" exclaimed Kurt Brenckenberg at last, triumphantly. "Then, naturally, I draw my own conclusions."

"Good gracious! Herr Kandidat," said Hertha, elevating her shoulders contemptuously, "do you imagine I am going to dispute with you? Elly has not had my experience of life. She is still a silly young thing, and it was very wrong of you to take advantage of her silliness. She thought that she was bound to answer your letters. That is the long and short of it. And now I will give you a piece of advice. Don't dare come near her again, or write notes, or sing songs in the park, or carry on any more of that nonsense. For if you do, I will tell my brother the whole story, and he will point out to you clearly your duty in the matter. Good evening, Herr Kandidat!"

She drew her skirts together and passed by him, with the dead leaves fluttering around her.

For a long time Kurt stared blankly after her. The slender, upright, girlish figure was silhouetted in picturesque outline against the sulphur-coloured sky, and then vanished behind the churchyard wall.

"What a dog's life it is!" he murmured. "One begins to think one has a heart, and then it all comes to nothing."

He sat down on the edge of a grave and brooded. The wind howled, and the dry leaves came whirling down like autumnal spirits. He reflected on fame, heroism, the madness of love, and the perishableness of all earthly things.

"When a man has no money, he is nearly as good as dead," he quoted sadly, and then stood up, for supper-time was drawing near.

XXVIII

ONE afternoon Ulrich rode over to Halewitz with the news that a meeting of the Reichstag had been called for the third week in November.

Leo was alarmed, for it meant nothing less than being left ten days alone with Felicitas. In every limb he felt the shock which seemed to be propelling him several steps nearer the unknown fate that loomed in front of him.

He could have caught Ulrich's hands and cried in his ears, "If you value both our lives, stay here!"

And he was still in this frame of mind when his friend approached him with an extraordinary proposal.

"Felicitas has begged me," he said, with his quiet friendly smile in which pure goodness of heart put to flight all gravity, "to be spokesman for her in giving expression to a desire which she has long had very much at heart, a desire shared by your sister Johanna. Both wish that our respective families should partake together of the holy sacrament on the day before my departure."

Leo was filled with joy. It seemed to him as if a sustaining hand had been stretched out to him from the clouds, to afford him anchor and refuge in the whirlwind by which he had been threatened.

This ceremony would be a protection in the hours to be passed alone with her, it would be the highest consecration of his purer will.

"And what do you think about it, Uli?" he asked, looking inquiringly at his friend.

"I for my part seek and value every opportunity," he replied, smiling back at Leo, "which lifts me above the barren level of every-day thoughts. Were my breathing apparatus like other people's, I should love to climb to high places and get a wider outlook. Such an outlook over what has been and is to be is found in preparing for the sacrament. I have heavy work in prospect, this winter, and shall be obliged in my section to offer opposition to the tactics of my friends—it will do me good to travel to Golgotha beforehand, to prove whether I am fit for it."

"What worlds he is above me," thought Leo. "He lives in

the heart of his ideals, and suspects nothing of the pack of impure thoughts some people have to drag about with them."

It now only remained to be decided which church should be chosen. Leo was certain that Felicitas would sooner die than stand with him before the revengeful countenance of Pastor Brenckenberg. And he, too, could not have endured the ordeal. Anxiety at the threats and antics of this "man who knew" would have dispelled all devotional feeling. Also the neighbouring parish, in which Uhlenfelde was included, must be avoided or Brenckenberg's jealous fury would be aroused.

There remained as neutral ground, Münsterberg, and it seemed advisable to drive over to the church of Superintendent Fürbringer, who was much beloved in the district for his mild Christian spirit and charitable disposition.

The rest was easily arrranged. Grandmamma, who consented joyfully, undertook to inform Johanna of the plan, and the "chicks" were not even consulted.

When Leo entered the castle of Uhlenfelde the next day, his hand was seized in a woman's warm trembling clasp, and he heard a fervid whisper at his ear.

"Thank you. Oh, thank you."

He drew back astonished. A shadow glided away; a glass door rattled in the distance. Perplexed, stunned, as if he had encountered a vision, he groped his way on to Ulrich's study. Those hotly whispered words of thanks continued to ring in his ears.

The week passed in nervous impatience. On Saturday morning they were to drive over to confession, and Johanna came to the castle to join the others. In the searching glance she directed to him, Leo recognised with horror her never-slumbering suspicions. He felt that it would be beyond his powers of endurance to take an hour's drive, with the police-sergeant gaze fixed on him, so he ordered round the small dog-cart for his own use.

Hertha, who sat by the window, in hat and cloak, heard him, and looked surprised as her eyes wandered out into the pouring rain, and Johanna, who seemed to understand his reasons, smiled sourly to herself. The family coach started with its freight of ladies, and Leo followed a quarter of an hour later. Wrapped in his mackintosh, with his Scotch cap pressed far back on his neck, chewing his extinguished cigar, he drove along the spongy roads. He had left his man behind, for he wished to be alone. He was approaching the religious business as an adventure—an adventure on the result of which the weal or woe of his whole future depended. The strength that he no longer found in himself should descend on him from Heaven in this mystery of incarnation. Either the grace of God would endue him with peace now and henceforth, or it would be lost to him for ever.

He drove by the Wengern Parsonage with averted face, as if he were a thief slinking by. And in reality it was rather like it. Stealthily and by a back way he was going to creep into the circle of the divine forgiveness, and try and obtain by a miracle what others struggled for with clean hands and hearts, and by dint of strong effort. The wheels rattled down into the ferry ruts. Old Jürgens informed him respectfully, that the ladies had just been taken across.

"Ah! the one who will be the gnädiger Herr's young bride is an angel," he added, beaming, while he let the dripping rope glide through his horny fingers.

"Bride? Which do you mean?"

"Why, gnädiger Herr the young gracious countess, of course!" replied Jürgens, and winked slyly, as people are wont to do when talking of a well-matched pair.

"Is the fellow mad?" he thought. But fear disarmed his anger. What would happen to Hertha if this gossip was already afloat?

Since that last encounter, they had been as strangers to each other, and had scarcely exchanged a morning or evening salutation, and now there could be no further question between them of two souls seeking a common ground of agreement. That which their silence concealed meant an eternal estrangement. But what did it all matter, compared with that great daily-growing need of his, which swallowed all minor cares, losses and trials, as if they had never existed?

Peace, peace, at any price!

The Halewitz and Uhlenfelde carriages were drawn up tractably side by side at the Münsterberg church door, and a few peasant equipages modestly brought up the rear. He stepped into the grey bare church. The first thing his eye lighted on were the words in gigantic, gold letters, "Peace be with you," which shone above the altar in a half-circle. They seemed the solitary decorations which this bare God's house, stuffed with pitch-pine benches, contained.

But what more did it want? What they promised to the pious worshipper, as a matter of course, was the one essential for which he was striving.

The words affected him so powerfully that he felt his tears rising. He hid himself quickly behind a pillar, and laid his open hand across his eyes. He cursed his soft-heartedness, and conjured up some of his wildest memories in order to regain the mastery of himself.

At last he dared to venture forth and look around him. On the middle benches sat several groups of working people; women who had cried their noses red, and men who stared with vacant curiosity at the organ and choir.

His own people had not yet entered the church. Apparently they were still lingering in the vestry, which was always open to the high nobility.

Thither he betook himself. His footsteps echoed through the aisles. The praying women raised their noses a little; the men watched him idly. Felicitas was the first to meet him in the vestry.

He recoiled with an involuntary shudder; then quickly recovered himself, and gravely gave her his hand, feeling conscious that Johanna was keenly observing every *nuance* of their meeting. And as he looked up he was aware that, from the dark background, a second pair of eyes rested on them with questioning anxiety.

Then Ulrich came to shake him by the hand, and to introduce him to the superintendent, a lean, gentle-eyed man with glasses and greyish whiskers, who welcomed him in a clear high tenor. His voice sounded in his ears like a peace-giving orison, compared with Brenckenberg's thunderous growl.

They now moved into the church, and took their places on the benches. Ulrich sat on Leo's right; Elly on his left. So everything was arranged as it should be. The service began. A chorale was sung, and the usual penitential prayer followed.

Leo strove to attend, but he could not succeed. He still stared, as if fascinated, at the golden words which shone down on him from the wall—like a magic formula. He tried to tear his eyes away from them, but they seemed almost to hypnotise him. Peace, peace, at any price!

And then suddenly words from the altar penetrated to his ear. "In virtue of my spiritual office I announce to thee, 'that thy sins are forgiven.'"

He started up in surprise; could it be so rapidly, so simply done? That for which he had struggled with the tension of despair, with the offering up of his whole nature, was here, after a few moments of uncomfortable meditation, tossed into his lap like a casual gift, with a stereotyped speech by a strange, be-spectacled man.

How could it, how dared it happen thus?

Close by him sat the man against whom he had sinned; not to mention that other who rotted in the earth. A little further away was the woman with whom he had sinned, flooding him with the horror of her presence—and behind her, she who knew all. Everything was just as it had been five minutes ago; yet in spite of that his guilt was to be instantly wiped out, because the quiet man up there, in "virtue of his office," chose to say so, forsooth. How was one to believe it? The organ passed into the arabesques of a florid voluntary. The confession was at an end.

As Leo gave the superintendent his hand at parting, he met a

friendly, well-meaning glance from behind the eye-glasses, which seemed to say, "Taken altogether, you must be a fine fellow."

"I was once," thought Leo, responding mutely to the mute speech, and he resolved on the spot to seek counsel and rest for his soul from this man of peace.

Pleading business in the town, he left his party to drive home without him. He promised Ulrich to look in at night, and avoiding a last significant look of Lizzie's, he went to lounge away two unprofitable hours on the tobacco-saturated horsehair cushions of the Prussian Crown, pawing, without appetite, the food which the officious landlord set before him.

Then he found his way to the superintendent's house, while the rain still poured from the heavens. The deal floor of the entrance-hall, as he came into it, gleamed silver in its polished cleanliness, as if it had just come from the carpenter's. The same aggressive polish radiated from the steps of the wooden staircase which led to the first floor. Every rib and vein in the boards was visible, though they might have lain there for many years. Biblical pictures in mahogany frames, crowned with wreaths of immortelles, hung on the snow-white chalk of the walls. A distinct odour of freshly roasted coffee permeated the atmosphere; an odour which has a habit of clinging to dwellings in which painful neatness is combined with modest cheer, and thus counts as a guarantee of bourgeois domestic bliss.

The door was opened noiselessly by a girl of twelve, who appeared on the threshold in a stiffly starched apron, with lappets which spread over her shoulders like the collar of a mandarin. She giggled artlessly, and then waited silently to hear what he wanted. Her flaxen hair differed so little from the colour of her skin, and was strained back so smoothly and flat over her head, that without the plaits, which formed a nest on her neck, it would have been difficult to see that she was not bald.

When Leo had expressed his wishes, she rubbed her nose a moment, and then vanished through another door. Not a sound was now audible.

"So this is what peace looks like," thought Leo, glancing round him. He felt as if he were standing at the entrance of the promised land.

"Papa says, will you come in, please?" said the little girl, with another spasmodic giggle.

He walked in.

The superintendent, in his long alpaca house-coat, with the pattern of the cushion against which he had been reclining imprinted in red lines on his right cheek, stood at the door. He was wiping his glasses, and blinked sleepily with his shortsighted eyes.

"Pardon," he said, in a friendly tone. "I have just been taking

my midday *siesta*, and have been lying on my glasses. Without them I am not quite sure with whom I have the pleasure——"

When Leo gave his name the expression of the thin mild face became a shade friendlier without losing its composure.

"This is a real honour for me, Herr von Sellenthin," he said, and invited him to sit down on the sofa covered with red flowery cretonne, which, as Leo dropped on to it, uttered a squeaking sound, and the springs of which made themselves disagreeably felt. "There are many roads which lead men to men," continued the shepherd of souls; "may I hope that the one you have come by is blessed?"

He stretched out both his hands to Leo, who seized them with grateful warmth.

"It may surprise you, Herr Superintendent——" he began.

"Pardon, dear Herr von Sellenthin, on the contrary, I might almost say, with truth, that I expected you."

"How? Expected me!" echoed Leo, astonished.

"Could there be anything more natural than that the penitent who is confiding his conscience to an unknown man, who promises him something so infinitely great, should wish to enter into closer human relations with him? Although we, as Protestants, do not recognise the institution of a father confessor, we don't desire to administer our healing in the lump. Each of us has his peculiarity, his prejudices, and, to come to the worst, his doubts, and it is to discuss one or other of these points, if I am not mistaken, that you have honoured me by coming here."

"You are right, Herr Superintendent," Leo replied, his confidence growing.

"And there is one more thing that I would say, my worthy friend. I do not intrude into the secrets of my brother penitents, and have no wish that they shall specify categorically the causes of their heaviness of heart, for that is difficult and awkward for both sides."

"It was not my intention to do so," said Leo.

"Capital! All the easier will it be to gain our object." And with a motion of his hand, he invited Leo to explain how his affairs stood.

"You may have heard, Herr Superintendent, that I for a long time shunned my birthplace," Leo began, involuntarily adopting, somewhat, in spite of his natural bluntness, the form of speech of the pulpit orator.

"I have certainly heard something to that effect," replied the latter, cautiously.

"For years I was knocking about in foreign countries, and gave very little thought to the salvation of my soul. I lived according to

the morals and customs of my half-civilised surroundings, and saw nothing wrong in so doing."

"That can be taken for granted," the superintendent put in.

"But, now that I find myself back, and in normal circumstances, I see, with horror, the nature of the crime I am guilty of."

The superintendent made a slight inclination of the head, and stroked his shaven chin.

"That, too, is easily understood."

"Put yourself in my place. What once had seemed perfectly legitimate, and in accordance with my sense of honour, began to disturb my conscience, to torment me at night, to hunt me about by day, to render me slack in body and intellect; in fact, it has so transformed my character, that I am but the shadow of my former self."

The parson nodded contentedly, like a doctor does when the patient enumerates one after the other, symptoms of the disease which he has diagnosed beforehand.

"And for this evil you seek a remedy?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My dear friend, even in the very evil itself lies the remedy."

Leo felt the blind anger rise within him, which now so frequently overwhelmed him. This, after all, came to very much the same as Brenckenberg's doctrine.

"Don't frown, my dear friend, nor argue with God; but fold your hands, and praise His Holy Name for the grace which has brought you even to this condition of mind, and laid this leaven in your heart to prepare it for the blessings He will rain on you."

"What blessings?"

"The blessings of His infinite mercy. How can you even ask when you already stand on the threshold of Salvation? Like the blind man led by God's angel, you have been wandering, you knew not whither, and while you have been thinking yourself lost you suddenly find yourself even at the door of Heaven. A hidden voice has been bidding you to the Lord's Table, and this voice was even the voice of Divine Grace."

Defiance and suspicion fought for the mastery in Leo's soul. The little word "even," which the man interpolated so repeatedly into his sentences, irritated him. After using it he had a habit of pausing, while he smacked his lips, so that however dulcet and consoling his words might be, it gave his delivery an air of dryness. But never for a moment did he abandon the quiet, modest, warm-hearted tone with which he had wooed Leo's confidence from the first.

"And, therefore, my dear friend, I may even promise you that to-morrow you will experience a divine miracle. The moment

that the sacred chalice touches your lips the trouble you suffer from will be charmed away, and at the same time, the sin which you so earnestly repent will cease to distress you. If you had not intimated this penitence to me I could not speak with such assurance, but now I may bid you welcome as a worthy guest, whose soul is clad in white garments, to God's table."

Leo suppressed a scoffing smile. How unsuspecting and innocent it all sounded!

This worthy man, with his feet on the spotless, scrubbed boards of his house, breathing in the soothing fumes of roasted coffee-berries, tattooing his cheek every afternoon with the impress of the bead-embroidered cushion, what did he know of the depths and tortures of the hell in which he wrestled?

And, notwithstanding, how full of promises and evangelical consolation were his pronouncements! To hear him was like listening to a lullaby one sings to a crying infant.

A miracle was to happen! In truth, a miracle must come to pass, for in it his only chance of redemption lay. He had been on the watch for a miracle, and now one was prophesied. What more could he desire?

Meanwhile the little flaxen-haired daughter had come in from the next room, and now leaning against her father's knee she whispered something in his ear.

He looked at the clock, smacked his dry lips, as if he were on the point of saying "even," and shook his head smiling. Then a bright idea seemed to strike him. He turned to Leo.

"It would be doing us a great honour if you would drink a cup of coffee with us quietly?"

It might have been interpreted as a slight if he had declined the invitation, and two minutes later the small daughter, biting her lips in anxiety lest she should spill anything, carried in a china tea-tray, from which the fragrance of coffee, which had hitherto faintly filled the air, streamed in full strength. A woman's hand, with a polished wedding-ring on it, was visible for a moment at the latch of the door, but, having done its duty, was about to be withdrawn, when the superintendent said—

"Come in, dear wife, and let me present you to our distinguished guest."

A female figure, clad in black, appeared on the threshold. Spare, yet dignified; serious, yet friendly; severe, and yet kind-hearted, this lady seemed admirably adapted to preside unostentatiously at Women's Unions and Mother's Meetings, and to take the place of honour with quiet self-possession beside the wives of the landed gentry. On her head she wore a black cap, scarcely larger than half a crown. Two wide ribbons floated over her ears

to her shoulders, heightening the impression her personality made, of unassuming solemnity.

The superintendent introduced her to Leo. The hand she offered him was grey and bony, as a labouring woman's, and the fingers ploughed with needle-pricks. It was reported that this hand had scattered blessings for miles round.

"You are welcome, Herr von Sellenthin," she said, with a stiff bow, and then turning to her husband she added, in a low voice, "Shall I send in the honey-slabs?"

"Yes, by all means send them in," he replied, after a moment's reflection, with the same air of friendly composure with which he had been dealing with the salvation of Leo's soul.

The two men were again alone. The clergyman offered Leo cigars, pale yellow cigars, which smouldered slightly, and he himself lit a long pipe.

They discussed the affairs of the neighbourhood and topics of the hour in a calm, matter-of-fact way; the harvest, the increase of pauperism, and the strike in Saxony, which threatened even here to become a social evil. And thus they came to speak of the parish of Wengern.

The superintendent smiled. "Your deceased father," he said, "filled the cure there with a queer sort of fellow. To-day it wouldn't be possible, for the law of sanction is exercised much more rigidly than it used to be. I will confess to you that more than once I have prevented a storm bursting over his head, for the consistory would be glad to have done with him. He is only saved by his orthodoxy and the strict morality he preaches. If half of his goings-on were known, he would long ago have got his dismissal."

"And you, as his superior, tolerate him?" asked Leo.

"Yes, dear Herr von Sellenthin. How shall I express it? It lies in the weakness of the human heart that a man sometimes can't do what he ought. I believe that the pastor has eight children. I have only five. Peter is the rock on which the Church stands, but it also has its John. Why should one not take John for a model, so long as one isn't a member of the consistory?"

Leo pressed the simple man's hand in gratitude.

"And then, you know, Herr von Sellenthin, that in conference, Pastor Brenckenberg is the only man who has what, at the university, we called 'ideas.' It's a funny thing what becomes of those so-called ideas. When we were young we all had them in abundance, but they diminished as we grew older, and now one hardly knows what they are like. When one comes across them in another, they are apt to irritate at first, but finally one feels that they do good. Therefore I suffer Brenckenberg gladly in our midst. And besides that, Herr von Sellenthin, there is a homely

saying which I have often found true, and which may apply even to your case. It is, that the majority of things are not so bad as they seem. You will ask, what about the deadly sins? God knows they exist in plenty. Seven of them, the Scripture says. But the main point is this. Why did the Saviour die on the Cross if we were to despair in our sins? Either that death seems to us an act of folly, which God forbid, or we believe in it even as a miracle, which every day of our lives is worked anew, and which to-morrow will be worked especially for you, my dear friend."

Filled with his harmonious views of life, he waved his cup to and fro complacently, to stir up the sugar in the dregs of his milk-coffee.

Leo rose to take his leave. This man, so inoffensive that one couldn't help liking him, was not the priest that his soul needed. So he hurried away, as much without comfort as he had come. He felt as if he could have shaken the dust of that home of peace from his feet, only there was no dust there to shake. He drove through the rainy twilight towards Uhlenfelde. Night had fallen before he drew up at its closed gates. His horse splashed in a pool of water, and a shower-bath of raindrops trickled on him from the leafless branches which flanked the road. He would have got down to pull the bell, but a numbness which had overtaken him made him set still instead, and stare in front of him.

The gate-posts stood there like a pair of black hounds on their hind legs, glowering at each other. To right and left a piece of the wall crept out into the night; the rest was hidden by the darkness. Only from the castle came one pale path of light. It was the lamp burning in the bay where Ulrich's writing-table stood. It shimmered towards him along the damp undergrowth of the park, which stood out of the darkness here and there in mirrorlike patches, as if it wished to guide him to the place which he hesitated to approach. But the further it penetrated the fainter became the light, till at last it was powerless to withstand the night-shadows which swallowed it.

Leo felt an icy shiver pass through his drenched body. "There is the priest I want," he thought; "the only one on earth who can save me."

But of what avail were these weak longings? He would only stand before him to-day, as always, biting his lips, his frightened glance wandering along the walls, a martyr to nervous fears and yearning, his ears strained to hear if a gliding step was coming along the corridor, the step of one who would sweeten his distress, and destroy his hope. What object would there be in coming here to-day, if he did not confess and repent? His whip cracked. The horse stamped as he turned round in the spluttering water, through which the wheels ploughed with a creaking sound. He gave a last look, full of impotent rage and dull, painful longing at the peaceable

stream of light which, like everything else in the world, served only to reproach him, and then he drove furiously back by the way he had come, still faintly hoping for what now was hopeless.

The next morning the rain had ceased. A pale sunlight, broken up by the drifting masses of cloud for several minutes, and then gliding down on to the yellow plain, illumined the larches, and threw a sort of lantern reflection on the variegated walls of the outlying forest.

Leo drove, as he had done on the previous day, alone to church. This time he preceded instead of following his party, for he did not wish to be disturbed at the outset by Johanna's grim scrutiny. His soul was now busy with a host of happy plans and pious resolves. An old glimmer of his joyous childhood's faith had awakened in him again. He would humbly lay down the burden of his sins at the foot of God's throne, and receive the pardon which the Lord held in readiness for him, with quiet thankfulness. It pained him to think of the ferocity of his yesterday's mood. He had stretched out the greedy hand of a thief to snatch redemption, to obtain heaven's greatest blessing in an embittered and obstinate spirit. But to-day it was coming to him unbidden. The November wind was like a divine breath against his heated brow; the faint sunlight poured a wealth of gold on his head. "The miracle is beginning to work," he thought.

But at the bottom of his heart crouched still the demon of fear, and would not budge—the fear of meeting her.

If only he could have gone alone to the altar! But wherever he went she was there also. From her there was no escape. In the same way as she stood between him and his friend, she stood between him and his God.

The Uhlenfelde barouche was close in front of his dog-cart as he turned into the church square. There she was! That black-veiled graceful creature descending the steps of the carriage with a dainty swing of her rustling skirts was the woman he would have liked at that moment to take in his giant arms and crush—crush like a ball of putty. He pressed his nails deep into his flesh at the thought of how easy it would be to do it. Ulrich, slightly yellower than usual, and with more brilliant eyes than usual, came up to him on his stork-like legs.

"You left me in the lurch yesterday," he said, in mild reproach.

"It was too late to come in," apologised Leo. "I was afraid I should not get the trap over the ferry."

"Pity!" replied Ulrich, "I wanted you dreadfully."

"For anything special?"

"I wanted a father confessor," Ulrich said, smiling.

"And I was to be *that*," thought Leo, grinding his teeth; meanwhile he cast a sidelong glance at Felicitas, who was arranging her veil and hair, and ribbons, behind the carriage, and seemed in desperate need of a mirror. "To-day she is going to 'fetch' God Almighty," he reflected, and anger possessed him in every limb as he thought how he loathed her.

Then he went to offer her his hand. Her eyes, swimming in tears, looked up at him in sweet entreaty through the thick veil she wore. She pressed his hand twice in hers, a signal of freemasonry between them hatefully reminiscent to him of their mutual sin.

A few minutes later his own people drove up. They were all in black. Mamma's lips were rounded from sheer pious ecstasy, and Elly, who seemed to-day strikingly to resemble her, wore the same expression.

"We have all fasted," Leo's mother whispered to him, full of pride.

Hertha was very pale and studiously avoided looking at him. Johanna, who appeared terribly aged and haggard, suddenly came and asked him to let her take his arm. He acquiesced in amazement, for such a thing had not happened since he came home.

"This coming to the Holy Sacrament is my doing," she said, in a low tone.

"So I thought," he replied.

"And do you guess what my object is in doing it?"

"I think that I can."

"It is designed, above all things, to perfect the reconciliation between us two."

"And what more?"

"Can't yourself tell you?"

Their eyes met in bitter hostility.

"Leo!"

"Well."

"Is it not well that it should be so?"

"Oh yes! It's an excellent idea, . . . really beautiful. Ha! ha! ha!"

The others, who had walked on, looked round. This outburst of hilarity was not in keeping with the sacramental mood.

At the door of the vestry he dropped his sister's arm and avoided speaking to her again. The superintendent was sitting at his official table, peaceably conning his sermon.

Leo went to him and spoke a few words of greeting. With a furtive smile of understanding the good man grasped both his hands, as much as to say—

"You and I, we know all about it?"

"Ah, if only you *did* know," thought Leo, in bitter irony; and

then once more he found himself searching for an excuse to get out of the way of the sweet, pale-faced, accursed woman who manœuvred without ceasing to take her place at his side. How was it possible to collect one's thoughts for reverence and devotion as long as that white throat with its double dimple was craning itself amorously in his direction?

In the church they sat in the same order as they had done on the previous day. Leo with his mother and Elly in the first row, behind Ulrich and Felicitas, while Johanna and Hertha withdrew to the third bench.

Every seat in the church was full. On the plain altar, covered with a red cloth, two wax candles burned in the sconces, according to the custom on Communion days. The building, with its grey choir and galleries, its faded-looking painted pillars, and bare white-washed ceiling, enclosed in its bald dreary spaciousness countless black rows of melancholy human worshippers. Only the reflection from the stained-glass window made a feeble effort to cast a little colour and character into the drab monotony, and over the altar niche shone brighter, it seemed, than before the words which promised such volumes—

"Peace be with you."

Peace, peace, at any price! Yet, was it not further off than ever?

The sense of the fatal woman's nearness was making all his pulses sting and throb. And while the sermon proceeded, like a tinkling brass on a tinkling cymbal, he sat hunched up, leaning forward against the book-rest, trying to follow an idea, and looking out for allusions which he could not grasp for all his suspicion.

Suddenly he felt ashamed of himself, and proud memories began to flash through his brain. He saw himself half-clothed galloping across the prairie, on his wild Arab; he heard the sounds of mad revelry round the camp fires at night, his own laugh, that of his drunken comrades, and he scented the mud vapour rising from the rushing leviathan rivers which he had forded many a time on his horse's back.

A very different motto had ruled that merry, devil-may-care life. Then, "Repent nothing" had been written in sunbeams on his heart. "Repent nothing!" had cried the voice of the tempest and the laughter of his mistresses, and everything that had language.

But now?

The autumn wind moaned against the leaden casements of the church windows. It made a sort of plaintive, whimpering melody—almost like the whimper of a penitent soul; and when a faint ray of sunshine found its way into the gloomy edifice, it pointed at once a

didactic finger at the words which held out hopes of a churchyard solace—

"Peace be with you."

He stretched his limbs and leaned back, and as he did so he heard behind him, scarcely a foot from his ear, a low, soft, bitter weeping; such weeping as comes only from the heart of little children or love-sick women.

He shuddered. A wave of stupid pity, which made him vexed with himself, passed over him and seemed to soften him towards her. In another moment he would have turned round to whisper a word of comfort. But then Ulrich's voice was heard saying, in affectionate remonstrance, "Pull yourself together, dear child." And at the sound Leo became frozen again.

But the sobbing continued. Tender and ingratiating, like an oft-repeated question, it got on his nerves and penetrated to his soul.

"Oh, that I might be left in peace," a voice within him cried. "Alone with my God."

But the woman was there, and there she would stay, sucking from his heart with her sobs all his calmness and strength of purpose.

"Leo!" his mother whispered warningly in his ear.

"What is it?"

"Stand up. It's the bidding prayer."

He dragged himself on to his feet. The voice of the superintendent came from the chancel in a subdued sing-song—

"Jesus, Bread of Life, grant that we come to this Thy table not in vain, or to the injury of our soul."

"Let us hope so," thought Leo; and a desperate doubt as to his own worthiness shot sharply through him.

The first service was over, and the stream of worshippers moved towards the doors—only the communicants stayed in their places. Felicitas kept her head buried in her prayer-book, but the rebellious little rings of gold hair on her forehead could be seen glittering through her crape veil. Ulrich seemed to be lost in deepest meditation. Then, as he met Leo's glance, his face cleared. He blinked twice with his short, tired lids, and infinite affection and confidence radiated from beneath them.

The church had emptied itself. The minister re-appeared in front of the altar, and read the prayer of invitation from a large, flat book which he moved to and fro in his hands. Then he lifted the folded serviette from the sacred vessels, which were set out on the right-hand corner of the altar.

Every one rose to draw near the Lord's table. The altar was surrounded by a balustrade covered with red baize, and at the foot there was a praying stool. Leo, without lifting his eyes, offered his

arm to his mother, and walked with her, leading Elly on the other side, up the steps of the choir. Ulrich and his wife followed close behind.

Johanna and her step-daughter hung back a few paces. Hertha bit her veil and clung to her mother's arm. At the bottom step she reeled and nearly fell. They knelt down on the circular stool. To Leo's left were two vacant places, and Ulrich was on the point of taking the one next him, when at the last moment Felicitas, letting go her husband's arm, pushed herself between the two men.

Leo perspired with horror. He felt as if he must spring up and flee, but that would never have done. He daren't move an inch, and was forced to submit quietly to her skirts overlapping him, and the upper part of her arm resting warmly against his.

The administering of the sacrament began. "Take and eat; this is My body." Two lean, apparently interminable fingers, on one of which flashed a wedding-ring, came in contact with Leo's mouth. He took the sacred morsel and thought, "At least I shall not share that with her." The minister went on murmuring, as he gave the bread to each, the portion of a sentence, "which was given for you . . . do this in memory of Me." And as there were fifteen people gathered round the altar at the same time he began again. "Take and eat; this is My body."

Leo gazed fixedly at the silver embroidered cross in the middle of the altar-cloth. He could almost have counted the threads, it seemed so near. On the bottom part of it there was a spot of grease which dimmed its lustre.

"Perhaps it, too, is blood," Leo thought.

The arm that pressed against him began to tremble as if it wanted the pressure returned. At that moment the minister took hold of the chalice and lifted it high above his head. A ray of sun shining through the painted window was reflected in the golden body of the cup, and it flashed forth a bluish flame.

"Take this and drink." The cup was being held to Ulrich's lips. "This is My blood——"

And now it was Felicitas who was drinking from it.

"She is drinking my blood, too," thought Leo.

With a slight swing the cup was withdrawn from her and it approached his own mouth. A dark mist blinded him. The sharp edge, as it knocked against his teeth, was still warm from lips which had just rested on it. The pungent wine was flowing into his mouth, and with a shudder he swallowed it.

Then in a lightning flash he saw what he had done. He had eaten and drunk damnation, and he deserved to be cast out for ever from the community of Christians. For in drinking the sacred blood he had drunk her kisses.

XXIX

WINTER came suddenly in the first days of December. The world lay hidden in snow, and the ruts of the roads wound over the great white plain like black ribbons. A sky resembling a smoky ceiling hung low over the earth, and the twilight of night seemed to fall before the day had properly begun.

The months from December to March are, as a rule, a period of rest and recreation for the country squire. He is now at liberty to enjoy social pleasures, take trips to the capital or travel in Italy. He may drink and gamble, or if his tastes are cultured he can order from his bookseller the latest novels and the newest sensation in current literature.

But none of these things had any attraction for Leo. He didn't care to associate with the neighbouring families, for he knew that matchmaking mammas regarded him as a catch. He was sick of travelling. It would have been a herculean task to get drunk, as he required so much to bring about that happy condition, and at Monte Carlo he had played so high that his empty coffers, as a memorial of his losses, warned him against further gaming. As for reading, he had neither the taste nor the powers of concentration necessary for enjoying it. Even the consolation of sport was denied him, for the big game of the prairies had spoilt him for partridge shooting.

Nothing remained but to do what turned up next, and to amuse himself according to the whim of the moment. And all the time longing devoured him. Yes, he could no more hide it from himself, he longed for her.

He had not met her since the ceremony of taking the Sacrament. Afterwards he had torn away as if hunted by demons, without shaking Ulrich's hand, without heeding his people's looks of hurt surprise. He had wanted to get away as quickly as possible from the perfume that she exhaled, away from the questioning eye of his friend, away from the house of God, whose gift of grace had been transformed for him into a curse. "For whoso eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh his own damnation."

So ran the text in the Bible which he had once learnt at school,

and which now was brought home to him with such terrifying force. Gradually, however, he had come to a calmer state of mind. Religious brooding was so foreign to his nature that he succeeded in throwing off the consciousness of being damned eternally. And yet on that day he had lost his last hold on his old happy-go-lucky will. Henceforth he lay more or less under the ban of a dull depression, which threatened to build a barrier between him and his fellow-creatures. Ulrich had been in Berlin a month, and during that month Leo had not set foot in Uhlenfelde.

"Don't go near her," was now, as it had been five months ago, the upshot of his wisest reflections, but the resolve which then had had its foundation in a courageous and vigorous character, was now prompted by weakness and fear.

He avoided, too, associating with any of the inmates of his house, except at meals. He saw plainly how much they were estranged from him. Johanna scarcely noticed him; Elly was frightened of him; and Hertha defiant; even his beloved old mother had no longer the heart to force him into conversation. Never, indeed, had there been a sadder Advent time at Halewitz.

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The sixteenth of December had always been a high feast-day in the annals of the county gentry, for it was Frau von Stolt's birthday. She did not send out invitations, but took it as a personal insult if people did not come on that day without.

Leo felt that he would be bound to put in an appearance at Stoltenhof, or risk a feud with his neighbours. He did not expect that *she* would be there, as Ulrich was still away, but at the bare possibility his heart seemed to jump into his throat.

There was a scurrying up and down the corridors, banging of doors without end; for the two "chicks" were going to their first dance to-day, so the whole household was in a fever of excitement.

At dusk grandmamma came into Leo's study, her bosom bristling with pins.

"Won't you, for once, drive with us to-night, dear son?" she asked.

"No."

"Johanna is not going."

"Still I say no."

"Leo!" With her hands folded and gulping back her tears, she came and stood close to him.

"What is it, mother?"

"Leo, are you ill?"

"No." He fixed on her a morose and vacant gaze.

"Have we offended you, Leo?"

"No."

"Haven't you the least bit of love left for me?"

He saw her pleading eyes, her quivering lips, and for a moment he was moved to sorrow, but the rising emotion was extinguished instantly, like a lighted match in a water-butt.

"Leave me alone," he said. "I want nothing but to live in my own way, and not to be too intimate with any one," and he turned his back.

She stroked his sleeve twice, thrice, and with this timid endearment slipped quietly away.

The next moment he heard her scolding the lady's maid because she had not ironed a strip of tulle properly.

"Fortunately things don't go very deeply with her," he thought. And then he was filled with disgust at his own conduct. Was he going to sacrifice his mother, too, to that nameless ghost of the past?

The big covered sleigh came round at seven o'clock, and half an hour later he followed it, in a small sleigh with one horse, as usual driving himself. A pale moonlight illumined the white expanse of snow from which the peasants' huts and farm-buildings rose in shapeless masses of shadow. The distance was enshrouded in a milky haze, setting the groups of trees in silver.

The road lay on this side of the river, but passed through Wengern and close by the ferry. Two sleighs belonging to distinguished company had just been deposited here as he came up, and he heard the music of their bells as they rattled on ahead of him. He would have known the tone of the Uhlenfelde sleigh-bells amongst a thousand, and he was satisfied that they were not amongst these. Would she be there? Would she be there?

And he stretched himself, for he was stiff and cramped with suspense. But when he reached the stables certainty awaited him. There stood the Kletzingks' old Wilhelm, touching his cap to him with the familiar grin which is permissible from the servants of a friendly house. It occurred to him that, after all, Ulrich might have come too, and the thought filled him with alarm. He would have liked to ask, but an undefinable feeling of shame stifled the words in his throat.

Then he slowly walked to the house. The castle of Stoltenhof to-night resembled a camp. The hall was arranged with booths and refreshment-stalls like a fair, and civil and military uniforms moved about in the gay throng. The officers of both the Münsterberg and Wartenstein-Uhlan regiments were everywhere very active, rendering the assistance which seemed too much for the legs of the more deliberate country "junkers."

Leo was met by his host, whose copper-coloured countenance, with its record of past pleasures, was beaming with good-humour and self-satisfaction.

"Ha! so you have ventured out of your shell," was his shrill greeting. "Come along, come along, they are breaking their hearts for you in the salon."

"Are your boys there?" Leo asked, longing, but not daring, to inquire for Ulrich.

"Of course! Of course! The young dogs are all there, the whole boiling lot laying siege to your fair cousin."

"Cousin! What cousin?"

"Why, your cousin Felicitas, naturally; you lucky beggar."

Leo was only too glad to forget the relationship. The reminder of it now stabbed him like a knife.

"And I can assure you she is in her old form! For a long time she seemed so altered, and made no disguise of being bored—probably she was grieving. But since the reconciliation between your two families she has been herself again."

Leo bit his lips. So they were talking about that already. Passing a number of hands outstretched to shake his, he made his way to the door of the salon.

Despite its ugly furniture and low smoky ceiling, with a six-branched zinc chandelier, it wore a festive aspect to-night, and blossomed like the rose with youth and beauty. A garland of fir boughs, decorated with lights, hid the palisade of famous racers from view, and lent an unwonted grace to the usually severely utilitarian apartment. The fragrance of firs and the shimmer of candle-light gave a flavour of the coming Christmas feast to the whole picture.

The young people were dancing with zeal to the strains of a modest fiddle and piano. His little sister, flushed and radiant in the arms of her partner, floated by. And while his eyes searched in burning eagerness for Felicitas, they fell on Hertha, who looked at him for a moment in cool disdain, and then turned her back abruptly. Her dainty, haughtily poised little head was unbecomingly coiffured, and her thin neck rose stiffly from her childishly undeveloped bosom. She was not looking her best.

He would have gone and spoken to her, in case the coldness between them should be remarked, when he saw steering towards him the mountainous form of the lady of the house, whose hand he had come to kiss.

"You should really take a little more care of our fair Felicitas, dear von Sellethin," she said, accepting his respectful salute with gracious condescension.

Leo wondered what she meant, for there was an undertone of distinct displeasure in her voice.

"Your friend is away," she continued, "and I believe that next to him you are responsible. Excuse my speaking so openly, but since I had the happiness to bring about the reconciliation between

you, I feel that I may, without offence, claim the rights of friendship, too."

"Please be a little more explicit, my dear madame."

"Oh, there is nothing to explain. I only would hint that she needs an eye over her,—we all know she is a bit of a flirt, in a harmless way, of course; but she may be guilty of indiscretions which might be exaggerated by mischievous tongues, and I have no desire that a fresh scandal shall take its rise under my roof."

His feelings were of mingled alarm and relief. No one suspected. What had once excited suspicion had been forgiven and forgotten.

"Madame, put my mind at rest, in Heaven's name, and tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing very bad. But come and see for yourself."

She led him through the crowd of dancing couples to a small ante-room, dimly lighted by pink Chinese lanterns, where the windows were thrown open, it being the first cooling retreat from the ball-room. Felicitas was sitting directly in the icy draught surrounded by a circle of admirers, who filled with noise and laughter the retiring place in which they had no business to be, as they ought to have been dancing.

Leo saw, and his wrath rose so fiercely that at first he could scarcely breathe.

"Here is another friend of yours, my dearest," said Frau von Stolt before she went away. "Now your grass-widowhood will be completely consoled."

Leo felt that this was a thrust at himself as well as her, and he grew still more furious.

"Friend, brother and cousin rolled into one," cried Felicitas, holding out her ungloved left hand to him. "Why has your majesty not been seen for such ages?"

"You will catch cold, Felicitas," was his answer.

"Don't fuss, my friend, but give your lion's paw to these young men, and be a *bon garçon*."

Lizzie's "wild team," as they entitled themselves with pride, were all there—Otzen, Krassow, Zesslingen, and Neuheim, and the two soldier sons of the house, of course.

It had all been in vain, then, the sacrifice of his manliness, the plunge into a maze of lies and deceit. She had reopened the undignified flirtation with these silly boys without troubling herself about his opinion. He might have spared himself everything; all the long anguish, beginning on the Isle of Friendship that September morning, and culminating on the altar steps the other day. A red haze dimmed his sight, the invariable signal of one of his most furious outbursts.

"Pull yourself together," an inward voice commanded. He

realised that in any passage of arms with these youths he must be worsted, as she apparently was oblivious of any harm being done. So he shook hands with them and then said very firmly—

"You know, Felicitas, how careful Ulrich is of your health. I cannot stand by and see you catch your death. Take my arm."

She dared not refuse point-blank, for she dreaded a serious remonstrance on his part. She got up, and laying her hand on the arm of the younger Stolt, she said—

"He who is my cavalier mustn't try to be my master, too, dear Leo. Come, Fritz, and let us dance."

She curtsied, and with her feet already beating time to the music of the waltz, she rustled past him.

"Never mind, Sellenthin," said young Zesslingen, naïvely, "she treats us worse than that, even."

To the rage of mothers and the chagrin of sisters, the troop of youths now took up their post at the door of the salon, awaiting the moment when their charmer should stop to rest, and they be able to rush to her again.

As Leo was making his way back to the hall, he encountered Kurt Brenckenberg, mincing and smug, with fresh wine-stains on the silk lappets of his dress-coat. He whistled indifferently to conceal an uneasy conscience, and made a sharp detour to avoid Leo. The latter remembered the song of "The Smiling Stars," and he beckoned Elly to come and speak to him for a moment. She flew from her partner's arms to his, half wild with triumph in her conquests.

"Look here," he said, "it is my wish that you don't have anything more to do with the Candidate Brenckenberg."

She looked blank at first, as if the name had entirely escaped her memory.

"Candidate! Candidate! Oh, you mean . . . *him*. I have cut him long ago. Dear Leo, you may make your mind quite easy on that score, I assure you."

And with one of those expressions of boundless and unutterable contempt which very young and ingenuous ladies always know how to command, she glanced over her shoulder at the object of her first love, who, in his mortification, was biting the fingers of his cleaned white kid gloves.

Having thus discharged a brotherly duty, Leo began to be depressed with a sense of his own superfluity and complete aloofness from everybody around him. He felt shame-stricken and paralysed. A dull fury smouldered in his heart, which changed its aspect every minute. Now it was ready to break out and commit murder, then it sank into an impotent, passive, gnawing grief.

Suddenly a light was thrown on what ailed him, and he knew that this poison in his veins meant jealousy. At the discovery he laughed

loud and bitterly. As it happened, the sound fell on a silence, and he looked round, horrified at what he had done, to see a row of astounded faces staring at him. He now became conscious for the first time where he was. He was sitting at the beer-table in the hall in the midst of friends and good neighbours, with whom he had scarcely exchanged three words since his home-coming.

They now all fell upon him. He must not continue to withdraw himself from their society, they urged, and live the life of a recluse and hermit. What cares he had brought with him from the other side of the Atlantic they would help to dispel. While they talked to him thus, he let his glance wander anxiously from one face to the other. How many men there were troubling themselves about his welfare, men who had the right to give him their well-meant tactless advice. And yet how they had all become strangers to him; and how easy it was to forget that they had sat on the same form with him in school, and taken part in his early escapades. Fate had laid a gulf between him and them, from the other side of which he saw their features looming indistinctly as if from behind a mist.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked them, when they had all done speaking at once.

He ought to come out of his misanthropic shell, they declared. Send his megrims to the devil; take his right place in the society of the neighbourhood, and perhaps look out for a wife.

"Don't talk to me of women!" he said roughly.

Then Hans von Sembritzky, sturdy, stout old Hans, who of all the boon companions of his youth, remained most congenial to him, came out with a suggestion. He described in glowing terms the social evenings which took place two or three times a week at the Prussian Crown, when landed proprietors, officers, and civilians foregathered to smoke, drink, retail gossip, and tell "good stories." He would be in his element amongst them, if only he would come.

He promised to make a note of the invitation. And then, to obliterate the impression of that mad unguarded laugh, he made a supreme effort to talk, and monopolized the conversation. He related some of his adventures "on the other side," and pictures of his life there passed in procession before his excited brain like a recent dream.

A large circle of admiring listeners, among whom were ladies, collected round him and hung on his lips. He was charmed at his own success; and his imagination became more and more inflamed. He bubbled over with humorous anecdote and pointed allusion. And while his voice echoed continuously in his ears, his amazement at what he was doing grew.

Faces became mere white specks. He saw nothing distinctly but the yellow-flowered carpet, the copper hanging-lamp, and decanters of

red wine. And all the time beneath his triumph a voice kept crying, "It's useless, useless!" For *she* had cheated him, played with him, he who had sacrificed honour, friendship, his life's happiness and hope, everything for her.

The man who sat there telling tales of encounters with Indians and wild beasts, half true, half invented, was nothing but an automaton. His memory flashed forth brilliant pictures, while his soul was in torment.

In the back row of his listeners, almost hidden behind the others, he became aware of a pair of dark eyes fixed on him in mingled fascination and defiance. One moment radiant with pride, the next lowering with fear. Those eyes belonged to a girl whose young heart was his own in every fibre, who was capable of rejoicing in his joys more than he did himself, and bleeding for his sufferings. And in return he had pulverised her in his rude grasp, and spurned her.

The sad pity of it all unnerved and unmanned him. He lost the thread of his reminiscences, his words became confused.

"I can't go on," he said, getting up; "I'll finish another time."

The little crowd, much disappointed, scattered, and he relapsed again into his dreary ruminations.

Towards midnight supper was served on small tables. Stalls and drinking-booths were now converted into buffets, from which each gentleman had to procure provisions for himself and partner.

Leo selected little Meta Sembritzky as his. Her small care-worn face appealed to his sympathy. She wore a very wide grey silk teagown, which only half hid her interesting condition.

Their conversation flagged, but they felt that they were old enough friends to understand each other without mentioning what was uppermost in their minds.

Nevertheless Leo was not left in ignorance of the fact that Hans came home very late at night, and that mamma-in-law was stricter than ever.

From a table at the far end of the hall, laughter was rippling, and salvoes of witticisms, which drowned other people's remarks and attracted universal attention.

There Felicitas sat amidst her adorers. Some of these considered that they had done their duty by taking in to supper raw young girls, whom they now entirely neglected to devote themselves to the fair mistress of Uhlenfelde. The poor damsels sat in awkward silence, casting despairing glances at their renegade cavaliers, whose jokes with Felicitas they could not follow or appreciate. The latter had defied the custom which would have apportioned her to a married man, and had come in to supper on the arm of young Zesslinger. But the young cuirassiers had both been sent to distant tables by their indignant mother.

Frau von Sellenthin, looking regal in claret-coloured satin and lace, yet lovable as always, towards the end of supper, crossed the hall with dignified step and motioned Leo into a corner.

"For mercy's sake," she murmured, "do you know what has come over Lizzie to-night? She is behaving scandalously with those stupid boys. Every one is talking about it."

"Why do you ask *me*, mother?"

"I thought perhaps you could——"

"I can do nothing. Felicitas is mistress of her own actions. If she chooses to make herself ridiculous, it is her own look-out."

And he led her back to her seat.

After supper, Felicitas came up to him with sparkling eyes and cheeks flushed from champagne and merriment.

"Gesegnete Mahlzeit, you growly-bear," she cried, putting her small soft hand into his, and shaking it with comical heartiness.

Not by the quiver of an eyelash or the trembling of a lip did she betray that there was any secret between them. Every trace of what had been and was seemed erased from her memory. He replied to her, "Gesegnete Mahlzeit," stiffly.

"*A propos*, Leo," she went on. "Are you in the humour for a spree?"

"It depends on what the spree is."

"Oh! you cautious old slow-coach. Listen, and I'll tell you; only you mustn't tell. We are getting up a midnight sleigh-drive."

"We! Who?"

"Why, these boys and two or three others. It's to be a sleigh-drive after the fashion of the King of Bavaria, you know—torches and outriders in mediæval costume, and all the rest of it. Unfortunately, there are no mountains to risk breaking our necks over. All the same, it will be a very *risqué* affair, as I am to be the only lady of the party. So I thought if I found a steady, reliable person —a relation like yourself—to come and act as chaperon, it would be all right."

"I am honoured by the confidence you place in me, my dear Lizzie," he replied, drawing himself erect. "But I am afraid that I am not nearly enough related to you to undertake the *rôle* you suggest without injury to your reputation. On the other hand, I am sufficiently intimate with Ulrich to call to account those who, by taking part in such a mad excursion, would put you so wantonly in a false position."

Three faces lengthened in dismay at his words. Even Felicitas grew perceptibly paler. Her eyes, which a moment before had flashed a mocking challenge at him, drooped in veiled supplication. He turned his back on the group, and re-entered the hall, trembling with suppressed emotion. There he spent another miserable two

hours, resolving every moment to go home, and yet incapable of tearing himself from the magic spell of her environment.

He sat moping in silence behind the broad back of a whist-player, apparently engrossed in watching the game, and only glad that no one disturbed him.

When it was almost three o'clock he heard one of the young officers telling a servant to order round the Uhlenfelde sleigh.

A swift decision made him spring up, take his leave, and rush to the stables to see that his own horse was put in as speedily as possible.

A clear, cold moonlight lay on the white world. There was a filagree of snow crystals shimmering over the surface of the fields as if a crop of diamonds were sprouting from the sleeping soil. Here and there the shadows of the trees dug dark patches in the whiteness. No lights shone from the farmsteads, and the white slanting gables and long lines of walls rose indistinctly against the silvery distance.

His roan had fared well as guest in the Stoltenhof stable, and would have started at a brisk trot, only Leo used force to hold him in. The sleigh-bells tinkled lazily through the silence. A consciousness of repose seemed to have descended on the earth; the vast repose of death, so dreaded by the living, yet exercising so infinite a charm.

"What are you about?" he questioned himself. "Why don't you give the horse a touch of the whip instead of pulling him in? Tear home. Don't look round, don't listen."

But his eager ear continued on the stretch for sounds piercing the stillness of the night behind him, and from time to time he paused to be certain that his own bells were not swallowing the faint echo of others.

He persuaded himself that it was to sit in judgment on her, and to take her to task for her conduct, that he would see her again that night. Yet all the while the miserable conviction was being borne in on him that what he thought was anger was nothing but a longing passionate desire.

As he passed the parsonage at Wengern dull resentment took possession of him.

"There the old rascal and prophet sleeps the sleep of the just," thought he, "while poor King David is wandering alone through the night."

He turned down the slope to the ferry. Here he could wait for Felicitas without exciting notice, for it was only natural, the ferry station being on his estate, that he should linger to see all was in order there. The black surface of the river was shot with silver, and the ripples broke with a crunching grinding sound on the frozen banks.

His sleigh-bells brought old Jürgens out of his bunk half asleep, holding a lantern in a tremulous hand.

"Who the devil is it?" he inquired, not recognising Leo in his modest turn out.

"Don't swear, Jürgens," Leo answered, feeling compassion for the old man on account of his disturbed slumbers.

"Lord! it's never the gnädiger master?" and he came and kissed his coat-sleeve, and would have taken hold of the horse's bridle to lead it down to the ferry-side when Leo stopped him.

He had only come, he explained, to ascertain the condition of the ice. The music of a three-toned sleigh-bell, faint and distant, fell on his ear. Leo's heart bounded. She was coming; coming alone. He wrenched off his fur coverings and, jumping out, tied the horse's reins to the palings that surrounded the ferry-house.

Jürgens chattered on with toothless garrulity, as is the way of old servitors. The thickness of the ice on the river was nothing to speak of to-day, but to-morrow it would be another inch or so, and by Christmas it would bear cannons passing over it. This was the best day of all the year for him, he had sometimes taken as much as seven marks in tips. So generous were the friends of Herr von Stolt.

Now she must be driving through the village, the sound was deadened by the walls of the houses. Suddenly it broke forth clearly again, and a shadow was cast on the churchyard wall. The sleigh curved down towards the stream.

Hers was the muffled figure leaning back wearily in a corner. He approached the side of the sleigh as the driver brought the horses to a standstill.

She had been asleep, and did not stir till the jerk of the sleigh halting roused her.

"Good morning, Felicitas."

She gave a low cry and stretched out her hands to him, half in fear, half in joy, like a child who is not sure whether it is going to be scolded or caressed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, giving a significant glance at the coachman. "I got out here to see if the ferry was all right. The river is full of ice-floes, and I am responsible for the Stoltenhof guests."

She smiled her thanks, for she understood his meaning.

"I will accompany you to the other side," he said. "If you get out we shall be able to talk better."

Obediently she let him help her out of the sleigh. For a moment he felt his soft burden cling to him, and light as she was she seemed to weigh him to the earth.

The sleigh pounded down to the ferry, and the pair followed it in silence.

"Leo!" she whispered entreatingly,

"Hush! and keep close to me!" he replied, forcing himself to speak severely, and he lifted the bar.

They stepped together on to the shaky companion ladder, jutting, narrow and slippery, into the water. They were hardly separated from its black depths by a foot. The rope, covered with icicles, shone like metal, and its frozen crust crunched against the wheels of the pulley.

"Leo!" she whispered again, and pressed her head against his sleeve.

"Now, what have you to say for yourself? You——" An ugly word, which was suppressed with difficulty, was on the tip of his tongue.

"Leo, I am desperate without you," she complained, in a subdued tone. "Why have you forsaken me?"

"How can you talk of forsaking?" he muttered. "While Ulrich is away, I can't come. That is all."

"Why not?"

"How can you ask?"

"But I do ask. We have repented and confessed. We have expiated our sin before God and man. We know that we are on the right footing now."

"Indeed! That is how you feel about it?"

"Yes; and don't you feel the same?" she asked, looking up at him innocently.

His answer stuck in his throat. Was it he alone, then, who was damned? Had God accepted her oblation and rejected his?

"We went to the Sacrament together," she continued, "and thereby gained our souls' salvation. We ought now to be quite sure of ourselves."

"We ought to be; certainly we ought to be," he sneered.

"Leo, please don't be so mistrustful. How can any evil befall us if we are sincere in following the path of penitence. We must hold together. If you leave me to fight alone, I am powerless. Day after day I have been expecting and waiting for you. Every morning I have got up with the question on my lips, 'Will he come?' And then I have hoped for the morrow, and again for the morrow, and so I have gone on. Oh, how long the time has seemed! My life has been sad and monotonous, and finally I was driven to despair and said to myself, 'If he gives you up you must give yourself up.' And so I began the old nonsense again with those boys. I have turned their heads and let them pay me attentions. And to-day a devil possessed me, and I thought, 'I'll just show him that I can do without him.' But all the time my heart was heavy, and I was crying out to you in my soul. But you were so hard and cruel, that I was forced to go on playing my part."

A strange sensation of content suffused his limbs. He felt as if a dead weight had fallen from them. He felt wholesomely tired, and could have stretched himself out on the spot and fallen asleep.

"And now you'll send those youths to the right about?" he asked.

"Leo!"

"Yes or no?"

"With the greatest pleasure in the world if you will come and see me again."

"But if I don't come?"

She hung her head in utter discouragement. "Then I can't say what I shall do," she stammered.

"When do you expect Ulrich home?" he asked, to divert her.

"Ah, Ulrich!" she exclaimed quickly. "In every one of his letters he has inquired after you and sent messages. Some he has addressed to us both. But I haven't dared write to him, because I haven't seen you. And what would he think if he knew you hadn't been once?"

"That's true enough," he said, and thought to himself that even the most trustful person would be struck by such extraordinary conduct.

Then he repeated his question as to when Ulrich was coming back.

"The Reichstag separates for the recess either to-morrow or the day after," she answered, "but it is very uncertain whether he will be here by Christmas. He has been chosen president of a committee—for some agricultural exhibition, I believe—and he will be obliged to give up part of the parliamentary recess to arrange matters. He told me to ask you if he should reserve a place for you on the committee, and thinks, for the sake of your reputation, you should accept."

Shame kept him silent. Whether from far or near Ulrich's hand was ever held out to him in loving, helpful friendship. He was a fool so to underrate his own strength of mind. Surely Leo Sellenthin could never be capable of the infamy of which he had been standing in such nameless dread?

"You will come, won't you?" she implored.

"Yes," he answered with prompt decision.

"Soon?"

"Yes, soon."

"To-morrow?"

He hesitated. That would look too much like passionate haste.

"I am engaged to-morrow at Knutzendorf," he replied.

"Beg off!"

"No."

"Leo!" she urged reproachfully.

"Would you have me neglect my duties?"

"God forbid. But remember, till you set foot across my threshold, not a minute will go by without my expecting you."

The companion ladder was let down. They struck the opposite bank, and the bar crunched on its frozen hinges.

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

Their hands met in a clinging grasp which it seemed as though only force could separate. Then they let go of each other with a start. He settled her in her seat and wrapped the furs about her. The horse moved on, the bells began to tinkle, and the sleigh melted into the grey distance like a silver phantom. The ferry raft gurgled back into the water, and old Jürgens breathed heavily as he pulled. His steering strings swished in the air like a cat-of-nine-tails. Leo, leaning against the side, listened to the dying echo of the sleigh-bells.

The moon was waning. The ice-floes split against the wide keel of the boat.

XXX

"MY DEAR MAMMA,

"Nearly all the boys are going home for Christmas. Erich Froben will stay here because he has no mamma, and Fritz Lawsky because he has only a guardian, and If., who comes from India, and is as yellow as a Gruyére cheese. All the other boys are going home. Why mayn't I come home? Some of them have a longer journey to their homes than I have. Oh, I do want to come home so badly. I cry every morning and every night because I may not come home. There are six days to Christmas now. There is going to be a party, and the boys who stay here for Christmas will get their parcels of presents when the tree is lit up. And a bell is rung, the school bell. If. will get something too; for the Head wrote to his papa, who said he would send his presents over in a ship. Have you got my list of the things I want? Perhaps it has got lost; that would be awful. But I'll write another list to make sure.

"LIST OF PRESENTS.

"1. A big box of lead soldiers—real thick ones, with proper bodies, not the smooth kind; they are no good.

"2. A fortress, a proper fortress, with a bridge that draws up and trenches that hold water, and the men who are shot fall into it.

"3. A cannon.

"4. Another cannon, which makes two cannons, and two cannons for the enemy too, because without, you couldn't have a battle.

"5. Lots of little cannons. An army must have artillery, and the side that has the best artillery beats.

"6. A menagerie. If. has got a menagerie.

"7. A pen-wiper; one in the shape of an owl is the prettiest.

"8. Would have been a pocket-knife, but crossed out, because the Head says any fellow who gets a pocket-knife will have it confiscated.

"9. A pocket ink-stand. Kleist has one; you press a nob and it springs open. It's a jolly thing, and doesn't ink your trousers.

"10. Can't think of anything more except sweets. Lots of them, of course, because without sweets it wouldn't be Christmas.

"Ah, but I would like best of all to come home. Dear, dear mamma, why mayn't I? But if I really mustn't, I'll try and be good. But it makes me cry when I think about it. The boys don't tease me now, and I have to thank If. for that. Once they bullied me so, they made me bleed, but If., who is quite small, too, went for the big boys with his penknife, and it was confiscated, but they were awfully frightened. Please send lots and lots of lead soldiers; I want to give half to If. And now good-bye,

"From your loving son,

"PAUL.

"Postscript.—I shall be awfully pleased when my parcel comes."

This epistle arrived at Münsterberg addressed to Minna Huth on the Sunday before Christmas. Felicitas read it over and over again, and each time it brought tears to her eyes, but she refrained from despatching it to Ulrich, for as likely as not he would have started off at once to fetch the child home from Wiesbaden.

To make up for sinning against the boy, she collected an unreasonable number of expensive presents from the best toy-shops which were destined to ornament Paul's Christmas table. Two great packets had come from Berlin, from which she was making a selection, for in her motherly pride she wished to send the presents direct to her son and not to let them pass through other hands.

Her corner-boudoir was strewn with cardboard boxes and brown paper, and was full of the fragrance of marzipan and ginger-nuts, which she had baked herself.

Felicitas was busy packing the boxes, which, to make sure of their arriving in time from Münsterberg, were to be sent off by the night train. Her sleeves were turned up above her rosy elbows, and she had put on a large blue cotton apron. She was radiant with excitement, and delighting in her task. She knelt on the carpet amongst the boxes, arranged the soldiers in order of battle, gave a punchinello a kiss on the beard, for the dear child who was to possess him, and watched with laughing amusement a balloon rise in the air with a tiny trapeze attached to it on which a toy acrobat performed his antics.

Apparently she was absorbed in what she was doing, but from time to time, Minna, who was helping her, observed that she would let her active hands fall suddenly in her lap and turn her eyes to the window with wistful longing.

"You are expecting some one, gracious little madame," she inquired at length. The wizened, yellow face bristled with curiosity.

Felicitas sighed and shook her head. Three days had gone by since that night on the ferry, and Leo had not yet put in an appearance.

"That is the way of gentlemen," the old sewing-woman philosophised; "they promise to come and don't."

Felicitas had told her nothing of her meeting with Leo, but since the old woman had seen her return that night with suspiciously sparkling eyes, she had put two and two together.

Towards four o'clock the house bell clanged. Felicitas made a bound towards the door.

"Now stay where you are, gracious madame," said the old hag. "It will be much better not to jump down his throat, directly he does come." And she hobbled off coughing to receive the visitor.

But Felicitas ran into the garden-salon and laid her ear on the key-hole. As she recognised the man's voice speaking in the hall, she put her hand on her heart and threw herself into an armchair with a deep sigh.

The old woman came back leaving the door half open behind her, and said, with the same assumed expression of vacancy with which she had probably received Leo—

"The Herr von Sellenthin is there, but I have said that madame is engaged——"

She broke off, for there he stood. He had pushed the old creature aside, and rushed in.

"At last! At last!" she said, as she calmly offered him her hand with a melancholy smile.

"Yes, at last," he repeated with a hard brusque laugh, the sound of which from him was strange to her. At a first glance she saw a change in him. His eyes rolled restlessly, and his forehead was deeply marked with lines of anger.

Her conscience was never quite serene, even when she was not aware of having erred afresh, so she asked, stammering—

"Have I done anything to offend you again, so soon?"

"Oh no, certainly not," he retorted, and leaned back for a moment against the wall, screwing up his eyes. Then he asked when Ulrich was coming, and watched greedily for her answer.

"Not before Christmas Eve, and it may be even later, for here we don't distribute our presents till the Christmas Day."

He drew a deep breath.

"What ails you now?" she asked, feigning uneasiness.

He laughed that hard short laugh once more.

"What can ail me, dear heart? A *tête-à-tête* with the most charming of cousins! Her husband safely out of the way, all scruples of conscience overcome; God Almighty Himself an accomplice. Could I wish for anything better?"

"Leo, don't; you frighten me," she said, and crouched back in her armchair.

"Why should you be frightened, my dear child?" he answered,

taking her hand. "I have become a little wilder these last few days, that is all. That is, I have been trying not to come, like the honourable man I was once. There! That promise at the ferry, dear heart—(I always called you dear heart in old days, so, now we are so intimate, I may again, eh?)—that promise was rubbish, you wormed it out of me, because you are such a sly card; and——"

"Leo, please, you hurt me," she protested, covering two tearful eyes with her hand.

He caught her roughly by the arm and wrenched her hand from her face.

"You shan't cry," he growled. "I can't bear to see you cry. Although I know your crying, like your laughter, is a farce, I can't stand your tears. Why not laugh instead? it all amounts to the same thing."

"Oh, if you should be heard talking like this!"

"What would it matter?" but nevertheless his eye wandered in some anxiety to the half-open doors.

"I can't take you into the boudoir," she said, thinking of the litter of parcels. For a moment a picture rose before her of the child all expectation and excitement about his Christmas presents, but it quickly faded, giving place to the more vital interest of the moment.

He stretched his hands out towards the door in fear and abhorrence.

"You'll never get me in there again alive," he cried. "Your cursed scent gets into my brain and drives me half mad. And to-day it would be ten times worse. But I tell you what;" his eye sought the window where the afternoon sun had made small clearings in the frost pattern on the panes. "Out there in the snow it is clear and bracing; and so quiet and lonely that one could talk in peace. Shout defiance at the world, too, if one has the mind. Put on a wrap and come."

She acquiesced joyously, and quickly wound a lace scarf round her head, threw over her diaphanous house dress a heavy fur-cloak, and hurried before him out at the door unseen by any one in the house. She could not refrain from congratulating herself on this point aloud, and he did so silently. Their flushed faces met the tingling cold of the winter evening. The sun was going down. A brilliant crescent moon hung in the steel blue eastern sky, above the stables, the copulas of which cut sharply into the air.

The drone of the threshing-machine was heard coming from the barn, otherwise the yard was still and deserted. They took the path skirting the gable wing of the castle, opened the postern gate, the latch of which was frozen, and entered the garden. It lay shimmering before them in its garment of snow with an opal haze hanging over

it. The urns at the corners of the terrace were capped with white and the vines on the wall cowered under their straw covers like freezing children.

As they crossed the lawn Felicitas tried to take Leo's arm, but her heavy furs impeded her movements, and she fell behind. The path became lost in the snow on the outskirts of the plantation, but still they were not disposed to turn back.

They walked on silently in single file, she trying to step in his footprints. Once he glanced round and asked where they were going.

"I don't know," she said, "only let us go on."

Aimlessly they wandered round the plantation. They both had a feeling as if they would like to creep away beyond the ken of human eyes.

Then he heard her teeth chattering. "You are cold," he said; "we will go back."

"No, I am not cold," she declared, shivering in every limb. "I have only got on rather thin shoes;" and she pointed with a faint smile to her gold-embroidered slippers, which in her impatience to come out she had forgotten to change.

"Turn back at once," he commanded. She pouted a little, and he, to put an end to her resistance, added, "Or I shall carry you."

She spread out her arms beseechingly, and said, smiling, "Then carry me."

But his courage failed him, and he took back his offer. "You had better walk," he said. "We might be seen from the windows, and then there would be gossip."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned round. It was nearly dark now. A bar of sunset pink glowed between the bare boughs, and there was a rosy gleam on the wastes of snow ere they became bathed in night. Nothing stirred, only now and then little heaps of snow fell from the twigs and, star-shaped, plumped on the ground.

As they came by the greenhouse, Felicitas pointed to the reflection of a fire dancing on the panes of the glass.

"We could warm ourselves in there," she whispered.

"Hadn't we better go on to the castle?" he asked hesitatingly, as he cast a dark sidelong look at the fire.

"No; come along," she exclaimed with a light laugh, and led the way into the glass-house.

He followed passively. Faggots of wood were stacked in the little room, and the firelight played on them mysteriously. They looked like wreckage gradually being devoured by a hidden conflagration. The door of the furnace was below the level of the floor. It was let into a recess in the wall, to which three steps led down. Flames escaped from the red-hot plaques, and the pungent odour of damp burning alder-wood.

Felicitas jumped the steps into the recess, and was going to hold her frozen feet to the furnace, when she recollected herself, and coming back to the swing-door which led into the greenhouse itself, she called the gardener's name through the darkness. There was no response, only the sound of water dropping from leaf to leaf in the hot, moist atmosphere.

"Now we are quite safe," she laughed, and skipped down the steps again, sighing with contentment at the warm glow.

The cloak slipped from her shoulders, and as she reclined against the steps, her figure in the blue morning gown was revealed in soft lines against the white fur. The firelight flickered on her fair hair and cast a shimmer like a purple veil over the rounded face, which wore the childlike pathetic expression habitual to it when in repose, and when she was feeling particularly comfortable.

"Why do you stand there looking like an old owl?" she said with a laugh, throwing her head back in order to see him better.

Leo, who was leaning against a pile of faggots, lost in thought, replied—

"It's a pity that that fur doesn't grow on your body, then you would be the image of Elly's white Persian cat."

"Don't you think that you have said enough disagreeable things to me, my friend. I show you affection, and nothing but affection, but you insist on behaving like a surly dog."

"Cat and dog, in fact."

"Leave off making stupid jokes and come and sit down."

He did as he was bidden, and seated himself on the edge of the furnace, so that he could look down on her outstretched form.

"Aren't we like Hansel and Grethel?" she asked, struck by the poetry of their situation. "Now tell me a pretty story of knights and princesses, and we shall be fifteen years old."

"You can feel so innocent?"

"Yes," she answered, "and so in love; not with you, you vain person, but with that chivalrous knight whom you are to have the honour of presenting me to. In old days it was the same, and don't you remember how furious it made Johanna? How furious!"

The grim picture of his sister rose spectre-like before him. He sank into a gloomy reverie, while she continued chattering.

"To speak honestly, I was gone on you then. You were such a thorough boy, but—what shall I say?—rather green. It seemed as if you wouldn't, or couldn't, see. Every evening I threw beautiful kisses out of the window down to your room, but you never noticed them. Yet all the same you were madly in love, and that annoyed Johanna terribly, and no wonder, as Ulrich was another bad case."

Ulrich's name that she thus let slip playfully over her lips made her pause. She gave Leo an anxious glance, and then gazed thoughtfully into the flames.

"Ah!" she sighed after a while, "who would have thought things would turn out as they did?"

"And are going to turn out," he muttered, shaken by impotent rage.

"What do you mean?" she said naïvely.

"Woman! have you no suspicion of the abyss towards which we are drifting?" he exclaimed, holding out his clenched fingers.

"Please don't tease me," she begged, and turning away from him, she half hid her face in the furs.

"Speak out! I will at least know whether you have any idea of the dangerous game you are playing with yourself and me."

"Ah, Leo!" she murmured. "I don't want to think; I won't think. It is so sweet to be together. That is all I know, and all I care about."

"At first we were to repent," he scolded further, "and to do nothing else. We were to go in sackcloth and ashes and scourge our bodies and souls. And God knows I have carried out my part of the programme. My remorse has so lacerated and bruised me that I feel as if there wasn't an honest fibre left in me. I seem to myself so corrupt and rotten that when any one offers me his hand, I almost cry out, 'Don't defile yourself by touching me.' If that was the object of it all, then it has been attained. But is what we are doing now remorse? Tell me that, woman—isn't it, rather, fresh infamy?"

"I don't know," she repeated, sighing. "I only know that it is sweet."

"And you are satisfied?"

She nodded three times in blissful silence. Then she said, "You are here, and that is enough."

"But you don't ask what I have had to endure before I came. Can you conceive what it is for a man to cling wildly to the last straw of self-respect that he has left. I have spent whole nights tramping the woods; I have run till the soles of my feet bled; I have tried to tire myself to death so as not to come here. But I have come."

Like a hungry, helpless child, he put out his hands to her in beseeching appeal, and she drank in his words with burning eyes.

"My poor, poor boy," she said, in a low tone, and reaching up to him she caressed his feet.

And then he buried his face in his hands and wept bitterly. She stared at him in terror and alarm. In all the sixteen years that she had known him, she had never seen a tear in his eyes before.

She jumped up, and taking his head between both her hands, whispered, "Leo, dear, dearest Leo."

She tried to loosen his fingers, and as she could not succeed,

pressed her lips to them. He did not stir. Her anxiety grew ever greater, and she sprang upon the steps to kneel beside him, so that she could put her arms about his neck. A dim inkling of her guiltiness towards him dawned on her as she saw this giant so crushed in body and soul. To make good the harm that she had done and to drown her own compassion, she could think of nothing better to do than to kiss him. And she kissed every bit of his face which she could reach. She kissed his hair, his hands, his throat. Then she drew his head down on her lap, and unlocked his hands with caressing fingers.

He lay like a man asleep, with closed eyes and relaxed muscles. His breath came in short, heavy gasps, and she kissed him long and passionately on the lips.

He opened his eyes shivering, and gave her a half-dazed look. Then closed them again.

"We must go now," she whispered, gently raising his head. "The gardener might come and surprise us, and then it would be all up indeed."

He rubbed his forehead, rose slowly, and shook himself, and then reeled against the wall.

"Come, come," she implored, drawing her furs over her shoulders.

"Yes, I am coming," he said, and stumbled obediently behind her out into the snow.

He paused at the hall door.

"You are not going home?" she asked, shocked at the idea.

"Yes, I shall go home," he responded.

There was something monotonous, almost mechanical, in his way of speaking, which prevented her pressing him to come in.

"Ah, how sweet it was," she murmured, seizing his hand and pressing it to her heart.

He made no reply, but turned from her and walked away into the darkness with uncertain steps.

She heard his voice once more, coming from the stables; then the tinkle of a sleigh-bell, and all was silent.

As old Minna opened the door to her mistress, she beheld a pair of eyes radiant with delight, and parted lips smiling blissfully.

"Now God be praised!" said she; "all is right again."

Felicitas glided past her in silence, and locked herself in her bedroom. It was too late to think any more of Paul's Christmas parcel that night.

XXXI

CHRISTMAS EVE was drawing very near, but Hertha Prachwitz was still not quite ready with her presents. For her stepmother she had painted a hymnbook cover of punched leather, with mottoes and emblems; she had embroidered a table-centre for grandmamma, and crocheted an Irish lace collar for Elly. Now she was at work till late at night on a pocket-book, which was to be sent anonymously to Leo, and which, besides places for letters, contained a memorandum table and a frame for photographs.

This frame was designed specially to hold a picture of Felicitas von Kletzingk.

Hertha had not come any nearer solving the problem as to whether she was wicked or not, but one thing she knew for certain, that he loved her, and so she hoped his love might not be in vain.

She herself had quietly renounced all thought of him. Perhaps she would become a Catholic again, and go into a convent, or perhaps, as sick-nurse, succumb to the first epidemic. There were, indeed, numbers of opportunities of seeking the death of the superfluous.

Her intention of becoming a hospital-nurse Hertha had not been able to keep to herself. Her stepmother, unfortunately, encouraged the idea. At this time she wore black dresses with white turn-down collars and cuffs, after the style of English nurses, and in secret made the sign of the cross over herself and Elly.

This phase in Hertha caused grandmamma much uneasiness, and as she found that she could no longer win the child's confidence, she consulted Pastor Brenckenberg about her one Sunday in the vestry.

The old man gave wise advice. He stroked his fat double chin, and said, grinning—

"Don't fret, Frau von Sellenthin, it is really nothing serious. Between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, sometimes sooner, sometimes later, most young girls get a strong religious craze. It will pass off like measles. Crossing herself, too, a habit she must have acquired when a Catholic, she will grow out of. Mark my words, and have patience."

The old lady smiled, and was satisfied, but Hertha's strenuous

mood continued. She had blue rings round her eyes, and gazed at the moon.

One might have thought she was ill, had not her figure, in these weeks, began to develop into beauty. The flatness of her breast yielded to rounded curves; her brown throat became fuller; her shoulders lost their angularity and took on graceful sloping lines. Her face alone remained small and sharp, and kept its bird-like, restless expression.

All the rebellious discontent and pain caused by the betrayal of her love, which inwardly devoured her, could not resist the influence of the approaching festival of peace and goodwill. While she was industriously working at her presents, love gushed forth from every pore of her being. An impulse towards goodness and forgiveness mastered her, and even stifled that burning, indescribable bitterness which, as a rule, took possession of her whenever the beautiful woman's image rose before her eyes.

The day before Christmas Eve, the painting of the pocket-book was finished, if not altogether to her satisfaction, and the photograph of Frau von Kletzingk, which she had abstracted from the family album, graced the frame. Now the only difficulty remaining was, how to get her present to the nearest post-office in dead secrecy. Fortunately, an opportunity occurred just in the nick of time.

Grandmamma, who was preparing the servants' Christmas tables, found her supply of nuts and gingerbreads had run short, and that she had also miscalculated the number of aprons and woollen mittens required.

"One can't turn a dog out in weather like this," she said, "but if only I knew of some one who was going to Hoffmann's in Münsterberg I would ask him to act the part of a real Santa Claus."

Hertha, with a beating heart, offered to undertake the journey.

"My lamb is always to the fore when there is any kindness to be done," said grandmamma. "In the closed sleigh perhaps you won't find it too cold."

Half an hour later she was on the way. A snow-storm whirled through the air so thick that it seemed as if white towels were flapping over the sleigh windows. The fine frozen flakes, as hard as bullets, pelted against the glass as if huge shovelfuls of white sand were being hurled against it. The voice of the storm whistled uncannily through the chinks. Yet it was cosy and warm underneath the fur rugs, and the twilight of the confined space was conducive to dreaming. It seemed to her as if a web as soft as velvet was being spun closer and closer around her, shutting her off from all the vexations of life.

She released her cramped hold on the precious pocket-book, and

burying her head in the farthest corner, thought only good and noble things about him. The sleigh flew through the air like a bird, only as it inclined towards the stream did it begin to bump a little. She looked up in some alarm at the miniature icebergs with clouds of snow dancing above them on either side of the track which had now been made across the solid ice.

When she arrived in Münsterberg and the chance of sending off the pocket-book was deliciously within reach she became undecisive again. All she had to do was to say to the young man at Hoffmann's, "Pack this for me and address it to Herr von Sellenthin," and the thing would be done.

As she was reflecting this she beheld, with a start, *his* sleigh a few yards in front of her. She recognised him instantly, without his turning round. He wore a pea-jacket and high oilskin boots. The winter cap which grandmamma had knitted him out of grey fleecy wool was drawn over his ears. A hill of driven snow rested between his shoulders.

Hertha was not in the least prepared to meet him in Münsterberg. It was true she had not seen him at home before she came out, but that was nothing extraordinary, because he was hardly ever to be seen there, except at dinner, when he still joined the family party to eat in silence what was handed him, and then to hurry away.

Now he spotted his own horses. "Hulloa! who's that?" he cried to the coachman, who stopped while he opened the door and looked in. "Oh, it's you, child, is it?" he said, smiling wearily and sadly, but filling her with delight. His beard was encrusted with snow, and thawing drops ran over his forehead and cheeks. "Have you still got purchases to make for this evening?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that's all right. I would drive with you only I've got my own turn out. I have business at the Prussian Crown. Take care of yourself, child, and don't get cold."

He gave her his hand and shut the sleigh door. The horses moved on and he vanished.

Hertha leaned back in her corner and shut her eyes tight. She was quite decided now not to send the pocket-book. He had only to smile and all her sulks were gone. Ah! she must think of something very nice to do for him now, something extra nice.

She accomplished her shopping at Hoffmann's, which was in a tumultuous bustle. She bought aprons with flowery patterns, and all the woollen mittens had coloured borders, and she defrayed the extra cost out of her own purse.

While she was seeing her parcels packed into the sleigh at the door of the Prussian Crown she became aware that Leo was sitting at a little table in the window of the coffee-room. There was a bottle of

wine before him, and his head was buried dejectedly in his hands. Her heart beat faster. She would have liked to ask if there was anything she could do for him on the way home, but she hadn't the courage to approach him.

The drive back was again like a dream. She could not forget how he had smiled, and how kindly and simply he had greeted her. It is Christmas, she thought, that drives all enmity out of people's hearts. And now she knew what she would do to please him. The pocket-book should lie on his plate as a token of reconciliation, and instead of *the* woman's likeness, grandmamma's dear honest face should smile out at him from the frame. That would alter the character of the present altogether.

Hertha arrived home at half-past two. She was tired, but happy, and still held the pocket-book in her half-frozen fingers. There was not much for her to do. Grandmamma and the old Mamselle were arranging the presents, and the salon doors were locked. Elly, who had been fearfully lazy, and had scarcely finished in time her two yards of tatting for grandmamma, was stretched out on the sofa and began forthwith to talk nonsense. If Bruno only knew what Frank had whispered in her ear, it must come to a duel between them, and if Frank knew what Bruno had said to Kattie about her, a duel would also be the inevitable consequence. First she said she would cry herself sick over Bruno's death, and five minutes later, over Frank's. So her chatter went on aimlessly, interlarded with all sorts of expressions which filled Hertha with contemptuous disgust. During the autumn Elly had acquired a whole dictionary of English slang, and talked of "hot flirtations," "jolly fellows," and of things being "smart" and "swagger," till Hertha was almost mad from irritation.

The latter stood at the window, from which one could see into the courtyard. She watched the drifting snow, flying clouds of which waltzed above the stables, and whipped from the slates of the roof, the white masses clung to the fanes like linen flags. The wind howled and sighed in the trees, and on the side that faced the wind their trunks were encrusted with great icicles.

Here and there on the lawn patches of the turf were visible, and within them the withered trembling blades of grass looked like corpses brought out of their grave by magic and made to dance a weird measure. A pale light escaping from the clouds illumined the dusk uncannily. The smallest strip of sulphurous yellow showed the place where the sun had gone down.

Hertha in her happy childish years had believed that the Christchild came down to earth on a sunbeam. But there was none to be seen now. Ah! how long ago it seemed since those days! To-day she felt old and weary of life.

Eternities of gnawing pain and suffering seemed to lie behind her. Yet before her she looked out expectantly for a sweet, vague, dreadful something, the prospect of which filled her young soul with blissful melancholy and brought tears of holy thankfulness into her eyes. It was like a low and mysterious whispering, an elegy and a song of spring in one. She thought of things that promise to blossom into vigorous life—a rose-bush covered with dewy buds; a bird's nest filled with yellow speckled eggs—such as these were the sacred hopes and secrets that lie buried and cherished in the depths of the soul.

And Christmas, after all was said and done, meant love and peace; goodwill and forgiveness.

The clock struck five, greyer became the masses of snow outside, and more and more did the roof of the stables become one with the sky, and still he didn't come. Already the hum of many voices proceeded from the servants' hall. Impatience had brought the guests to the house long before the bell was to sound. But grandmamma had been prepared for this emergency and had ordered an enormous supply of hot coffee and buns to be in readiness.

Hertha wanted to make herself useful and went down to them. There they stood in long files exhaling the odour of fustian and warming their benumbed fingers on their coffee-mugs. Johanna's ragged school was represented in full force. At first she had intended to entertain her pupils under her own roof, not wishing to crave hospitality for them from her sullen brother. But at Hertha's earnest request and grandmamma's assurances that Leo would not object, she had determined to bring her little people over to the castle for the festive evening.

Old and young greeted, beaming, the universally popular "gracious little countess." She took her favourites in turn on her lap, listened to detailed complaints of winter hardships from the mothers, and regarded herself altogether as a good angel. But time went on and he didn't come.

When it struck six the company began to stream out into the corridors and press towards the door of the salon. There they grew eager and noisy. Though each knew perfectly well that his plate would be standing ready for him in its proper place, they fought with knees and elbows to get in front of each other.

Hertha went back to the morning-room, because she was no longer needed by any one. Grandmamma was pacing up and down excitedly, Johanna was staring at the lamp, and Elly yawned and fidgeted with the fringe of the table-cloth.

"Such want of consideration," lamented grandmamma; "he must know that the people will go nearly mad at being kept waiting, he must know how they will want to see him, and yet he can't come

home for once, even on Christmas Eve, but must needs go knocking about goodness knows where."

Hertha was horrified at grandmamma, who always took his part, being so irate with him to-day, and that he should have at least one person to defend him she said—

"I met him in Münsterberg this morning. He had some business to do at the Prussian Crown."

But grandmamma, growing still more wroth, exclaimed—

"Business indeed! Who transacts business on Christmas Eve?"

Hertha pictured him hurrying through the snowy stormy night towards the domestic hearth, and saw him stuck fast in a snow-drift. Her heart was nearly bursting with anxiety and pity. How her sentiments had changed since early this morning, all because of a friendly word and a Christmassy smile. She glided, with the pocket-book under her apron, to a drawer, tossed Lizzie's photograph contemptuously into a corner, and put grandmamma's in its place.

The clock struck seven. They were getting so excited now outside that they were nearly forcing the doors open, and still there was no sound of approaching sleigh-bells.

"It can't be helped," said grandmamma, wiping away her tears; "we must celebrate Christmas without the master of the house."

"We ought to be used to it," remarked Johanna, in her bitter way.

Hertha almost hated her for saying it.

"But don't you see," replied poor grandmamma, beginning to cry again, "how doubly painful and trying it is for me? Four Christmases he has been away in America and God knows where else, and now, when he has come home, he treats me like this."

"Just wait another quarter of an hour," implored Hertha; "it's the bad weather, I am sure, that is keeping him away."

And they waited, not a quarter, but half an hour, and then the Mamselle came in.

"I can't manage the people any longer," she announced. "The children are crying, and the men say they'll go home."

"Come!" said grandmamma, resolutely; "we must begin without him."

The three who had decked the trees went to light them up, leaving the cousins alone. A breathless stillness reigned in the house.

"Do you think," Elly asked, still playing with the fringe of the table-cloth, "that I shall have any anonymous presents?"

Hertha shrugged her shoulders and disdained to reply. And then the bell rang. Hertha felt the same eager anxiety as in childhood as with trembling hands she gathered her presents together and took them to the salon.

The folding doors were flung wide, and she was met by a flood of soft light from hundreds of lighted tapers. The spacious room was filled with the brilliance and fragrance of three giant fir-trees. One for the family, one for the servants and tenants, and a third for the ragged school. On long tables with spotless white cloths plate after plate was ranged, and beside them were parcels of warm petticoats, shoes, caps, comforters, and stockings, the knitting of which had occupied grandmamma's busy hands all through the spring and hot summer days. For the children, besides the useful garments and the sweets, were piles of cheap tops, for, as grandmamma said, "we all must be young once."

In they poured by the opposite door with happy faces, and those of them who had threatened to storm the entrance a few minutes ago were the very ones who now sidled along the wall, too shy to approach the tables. They let themselves, at last, be brought forward one by one, and then eyed their property with sidelong glances as if they would have to steal it before it could be really their own. Hertha had so much to do in encouraging, explaining, and leading people to their plates, that she had no time to think of her own presents.

Meanwhile the inmates of the steward's house, the two bailiffs, the brewer, and the accountant, had made their appearance and drawn near the family table.

"A merry Christmas, my dear sirs," said grandmamma, struggling bravely with her tears. "My son is late. When he comes he will say more than I can."

The long-legged brewer was full of apologies, what for, no one knew, and Schumann seemed ill at ease. Hertha drew him aside.

"Honestly, Herr Schumann," she asked him, "do you think it possible that he has met with an accident?"

"He may have," answered the good fellow; "he may have missed his way in the storm and driven into a ditch, or something of the kind. But say nought about it, little countess, or it will spoil the fun."

"Then won't you take any steps?" she inquired, choking back her nervousness.

Yes, certainly, after the distribution, he would send out a search party.

And with that she was obliged to be content for the present. Grandmamma had a word of love and kindness for every one, in spite of her private distress. With quiet tenderness she stroked Hertha's cheek and led her to her table.

Hertha saw a stack of books and the flash of something gold, but her eyes were too blind with unshed tears to see more. Johanna, with chastened smiles, did the honours to her charges. She drew

them up in a line and bade them sing the two-part Christmas hymn, the practising of which for the last two months had resounded daily through the glades of the park.

All the little ones stood still and silently folded their hands. "Down from heaven, I came to earth," roared the sharp screeching small voices through the salon, happiness encouraging them to a mighty effort. Then of a sudden the door was flung open and violently banged back in its lock. Every one looked round, and the laboriously practised chorale began to waver.

"Silence there," cried a threatening hoarse voice which instantly cut short the singing.

Hertha's knees were quaking. She saw what happened while scarcely daring to look.

With blood-shot eyes and copper-coloured face, covered from head to foot with melting snow, he came across the floor, his heels ringing sharply upon it, and every one withdrew into corners in awe and terror at his approach.

"What mismanagement is this?" he thundered. "How comes it that Christmas is being kept in my house and I not present? I have had to climb over the wall like a burglar to get in at all. Out with you, you hounds! *Canaille*, get to your sleighs and begone!"

"Heaven help us! He is drunk!" murmured grandmamma, and wrung her hands.

Hertha threw her arms round her as if she would protect the old lady from his fury.

Johanna now asserted herself. "No one has any right to disturb the festival of Christmas," she said, measuring him with a scornful eye; "not even the master of the house."

"Aye, the devil take your fine speeches," he shouted, staring piercingly in her face with eyes full of hate. "If I tolerate your psalm-singing over there, all the more strongly do I forbid it in my own house. Now I wish to have quiet, do you understand?"

"Only too well," she replied, smiling to herself significantly. Then she gathered up her train and moved away.

He strode up to his mother, who has sunk helplessly into an arm-chair, and whose head seemed palsied with distress.

"Leave grandmamma alone!" Hertha cried, half out of her senses from horror, and she covered the dear grief-stricken face protectingly with her hands.

"Now, now," he muttered stupidly, and his blood-shot eyes were fixed half absently on the little group. Slowly he seemed to become conscious of what he was doing.

"Go away," exclaimed Hertha, trembling with anger; "you are behaving like a wild beast."

He growled and grumbled to himself, then threw himself heavily

on to a chair on the back of which a *peignoir* for Hertha had been artistically arranged.

The room had gradually emptied. Some had stealthily seized their plates, others had left their gifts in the lurch, hoping for a happier opportunity of taking possession of them.

"Come, grandmamma," Hertha said; "you will, at least, be safe in your own room."

He started up and then relapsed again into sullen brooding. Grandmamma rose with Hertha's help.

"My son! My son!" she sighed softly, folding her hands over him.

He nodded and continued growling and muttering.

The old lady left the room on Hertha's arm, and Elly, who had been hiding behind her table, trotted after them.

At the door Hertha looked round. There he still sat, utterly alone in the vast empty salon, with its illuminated fir-trees and the long white tables, and he was staring after them with an expression of such heartrending and inconsolable wretchedness that Hertha, at the sight of it, felt a cold shiver run through her. It seemed as if she were looking into an abyss of human misery that would swallow her too.

XXXII

ON the afternoon of the second Christmas festival, the two friends met again, after a separation of nearly six weeks.

Ulrich, who had arrived home on Christmas Eve, waited a day to see if Leo would turn up; but when he neither came nor sent word, he started off to call on him.

He found him in his study, still arrayed in nightshirt and dressing-gown, reclining on the sofa, enveloped in clouds of smoke.

"What a sluggard you've become," cried Ulrich, with a laugh, but his heart sank at the sight of the waste of so much splendid vigour.

The entrance of his friend gave Leo a slight shock of alarm. But he suppressed it immediately, and rising, hurried to greet him.

Ulrich was aghast at the red, bloated appearance of Leo's face, and the puffiness of his eyes.

"What is the matter with you? Are you ill?" he inquired.

Leo answered, laughing, "It's simply laziness—an attack of laziness, that's all," and he gave his friend's hands a pressure that was nerveless and limp.

Ulrich said nothing, but continued to gaze searchingly at Leo's features in solicitous anxiety.

"Sit down and make yourself at home. Won't you have a hot drink. Coffee, tea, grog, negus, eh? Damned cold out of doors. I preferred the storm. Have you had a comfortable journey? It's a long way from Berlin here. Why do you look at me so hard? You'll know me soon."

"I beg your pardon. I will look at something else if you wish it."

"Devil take it! Don't be so touchy, man. One has to be so beastly careful in talking to you. Now, have a cognac to please me. I have got it here—old Hennessy—it would pick up a corpse."

"You know that I never drink spirits or liqueurs."

"Very unwise. In the highest degree unwise, dear Ulrich. One ought to provide for one's bodily needs. It's a duty we all owe ourselves. Excuse me if I attend to mine."

He fetched a flask of cognac from the cupboard of his writing-

table, and tossed off hastily three or four glasses, which seemed to have a soothing effect upon him.

"You'll think," he said laughingly, "that I am becoming a secret bibber. But, I ask you, what else is a lonely beggar to do, when his heart——"

"It is your own fault that you are lonely," interrupted Ulrich.

"How my fault?"

"You hold yourself aloof from all your neighbours. You seem to have forgotten even the way to Uhlenfelde."

"Ho, ho!"

"It used to be the custom for you to come over to Uhlenfelde on Christmas Day."

"You might have come here as easily."

Ulrich looked at him in stupefaction. For the first time it struck him that, like more ordinary friendships, theirs might be subject to friction. So, in a gentler and almost caressing tone, he went on—

"As you didn't come to me, I was compelled to come to you. But I regarded it as my duty not to leave Felicitas yesterday, after being away so long. Putting yesterday out of the question, Felicitas tells me that you have been only once to Uhlenfelde during my absence, and that quite recently."

"The hypocritical creature!" he said to himself, and he felt a kind of melancholy admiration for her powers of dissimulation.

"Your wife is not you," he said, with a feeble attempt at emulating her.

"But she is part of me," responded Ulrich. "And it would have given me pleasure, now that things are straight between you, if——"

"Oh yes, perfectly so," he scoffed inwardly, and a short bitter laugh, which he could not check in time, made Ulrich halt in the middle of a sentence to give his friend another amazed scrutiny.

"For God's sake! stop staring at me like that," he cried, interpreting every glance of Ulrich's as a want of confidence. "You must put up with me as I am, whether I please you or not. And let me repeat what I have often said before, old boy—you, with your narrow chest and anæmic temperament, can have no conception of the evil passions which rampage about in this powerful roomy carcase."

He struck his bare breast with his clenched hand, and thought to himself, "What a brute I am!"

Ulrich made no response, but looked at him blankly, more and more unable to comprehend him. Leo was conscious how, step by step, he was losing ground with his friend. He saw as clearly what was passing within him as if his heart lay exposed under the X-rays. To himself he appeared in the light of a clumsy actor, disgusted with his *rôle*, yet making renewed efforts to play it out to the bitter end. So he went on.

"Think what a life this is for a fellow like me. In America I was in the saddle sometimes for eight days together, and only happy when I was going for man or beast. But here I am at a loss, and what interest can I have in this hole? How amuse myself? It will end either in going to pieces or putting a bullet through my brain. Look at me. As I lie here now, I have lain since yesterday morning. They bring my meals to my room, and at night I creep into bed. I shall be glad when these cursed holidays are over, for then I shall at least be able to work again; if you can call it work. The futile rushing about on the estate, with scowling face, and air of undue importance, when in reality all there is to be done is done by God Almighty. But one must needs interfere, must be doing something to deaden reflection, to hunt the wretched thoughts that torment one out of one's head. Yet every day they recur, whether one runs away from them or lies in wait for them like a panther in a cage, and the burden of them is intolerable."

"What are these thoughts to which you are always alluding? For God's sake explain," cried Ulrich, scarcely able to master his anxiety.

Leo gave a discordant laugh. "It would not interest you," he said, and he gave Ulrich's face a piercing sidelong glance.

Ulrich sprang to his feet, and began to pace the floor. His breathing came in gasps, and his haggard cheeks were flushed. Then he stood still in front of Leo, and said, with resolve burning in his brilliant eyes—

"Look here, I'll speak seriously to you, old boy. I, too, have my burden to bear. I have never felt more keenly the desolation of my home than this Christmas, when the little chap who should have been dancing round the fir-tree has not been there. He ought to have come home, but my wife didn't wish it. There's something strained in the atmosphere of the house now, a feeling somehow as if misfortune were pending. I feel a stranger at my own fireside!"

Leo cowered under the touch of his thin hand, which he had laid on his shoulders, and Ulrich continued—

"My single joy now rests in my activity as a politician. Of course it means incessant and untiring labour. You know what commissions are? But the seed is sown, and by Easter we may expect results. Probably our object will have been gained. But there is an enormous amount to be done, and I shall be of more use in Berlin than anywhere else. Now listen? When I left home six weeks ago you seemed to me to be all right; you might have been a little grave for you, but you talked reasonably and your eye was clear. And now I am back and find you in such a state that I cannot forbear saying to myself, 'He looks as if he were going to the devil.'"

"Well, I am at liberty to do so if I please," laughed Leo.

"I don't envy you that liberty, my boy," Ulrich replied. "Yet I cannot help thinking that even if I have lost your confidence and you treat me as an intruder, things would not have come to such a pass with you if I had been at home."

"What fault have you to find with me? Am I not to be trusted out of your sight?"

"Soon after the new year I am going away again. Goodness knows how I shall find you when I come back."

"Stony broke," laughed Leo, feeling his irritation grow.

Ulrich closed his eyes, moved to emotion by this insane burst of self-annihilation on Leo's part. Then after a moment he asked—

"Would you like to travel again?"

"No," was the short rejoinder.

"Very good. Shall I not go away, then? Would it be any help to you to feel that I was near at hand?"

Leo gave him a quick look in which eager hope and anguish were mingled; but then he answered, turning his head aside impatiently—

"Thank you, I am not in need of a keeper."

Ulrich blanched. "I hope," he said, pronouncing his words with difficulty, "that you don't mean what you say. I offer to sacrifice for you my goal, my ambition, all that I strive and live for, and you give me an answer which is an insult to me and our friendship. I am not sure now whether to treat you as a sick man or a stranger."

There was a silence. Leo had risen and stood motionless, with his fists resting on the table. The feeling of impotence and vacillation which so often overcame him was at this moment a positive physical martyrdom. Softer sentiments welled up within him; but all expression of tenderness was repressed by the stern necessity of deceiving his friend, a course to which he was eternally committed. To yield a jot would be half a confession.

"You take everything too tragically," he said in a jocular tone. "Idleness doesn't suit me, that is all. I, who am used to all sorts of escapades and a life of adventure and movement, am simply bored now, and can't help it. Inactivity makes my blood sluggish and gives me horrid thoughts. Wait till the spring and I shall be myself again."

He grasped Ulrich's hand timidly, and received in return a long and searching pressure. It was as if Ulrich felt to his finger-tips the unaccountable change in his friend. They began to speak of general topics—of agriculture and political affairs. But Leo could not recover his equilibrium. His conversation was a mixture. One moment it lacked confidence, the next it showed an excess of zeal.

Cynical jokes alternated with dull platitudes, and Ulrich was more and more perplexed.

They parted—Leo with a sensation of relief that the interview had come to an end, Ulrich sad and depressed. He recognised with sorrow that this friendship, which as long as he could remember had been part of his being, which had survived triumphantly Leo's four years of absence and his own marriage with Rhaden's beautiful widow, was now in danger of being dissolved. The future filled him with fears. But he did not dream that on the threshold of his home there awaited him a blow so unexpected and so terrible that it would drive all the gloomy impressions of to-day from his mind.

When he arrived at Uhlenfelde he found Felicitas lying on the floor in hysterics, with old Minna tending her, amidst wailing and lamentations. Half an hour before a telegram had come for him from Wiesbaden, and had been opened by his wife. It ran—

"Your son Paul is seriously ill, owing to an unfortunate accident for which the school authorities are in no wise to blame. He ran away on Christmas Eve; probably homesick. Was found to-day in a neighbouring village, where he was being cared for. High fever; and doctor earnestly requests you will come immediately."

XXXIII

THE sad news reached Leo in a note which Ulrich despatched the same night from the station at Münsterberg.

"Felicitas," it said, "suffers so intensely that it was impossible to take her with me; her uncontrolled grief might also be bad for the child. So if you feel that you can and still care to do anything, please help her."

That was a hard thrust—"if you still care."

Leo was terribly upset, and a dull gnawing self-reproach made him feel as if he were to blame for the turn events had taken. He steeled himself to write a long letter to Felicitas, in which, under the pretext of ordinary sympathy, he put his time and his person at her disposal, and offered to share her sorrow as brother and friend. He awaited her answer, fearful that she might accept. But he need not have been afraid. Her note contained only a few words of entreaty to him to stay away.

"For God's sake, don't come," she wrote. "I can only pray and weep night and day. You are the last person I wish to see." Whereupon he asked his mother to take compassion on the heart-broken mistress of Uhlenfelde. The good old lady, deeply pitiful, set out at once on her mission, but Felicitas refused to see her.

Four days full of awful suspense went by. Leo sent a messenger twice daily to Uhlenfelde to inquire, and he brought back tidings gleaned from old Minna that the telegrams from Wiesbaden still gave hope, but the case was a grave one. The gracious mistress was confined to her bed and prayed. The doctor from Münsterberg visited her every day. The hours between one piece of news and the next seemed an eternity. Leo didn't know what else to do, but shoulder his gun and stride aimlessly over the snowy fields. He passed the time by oracular questionings as to whether the child would live or die. He counted the poplars by the road-side, the hares running across the furrows, and the buttons on his shooting-jacket. He counted the number of breaths he must draw before he reached a certain spot, the sunbeams that pierced the dusky undergrowth of the fir woods, and the cries of the ravens that echoed through the silent forest—a monotonous game with varied results.

He made vows, too, that were the next moment forgotten. Now and then he was demoniacly jubilant, and sent a whoop over the meadows and was startled at the echo of his own voice. In the evenings he turned into the Prussian Crown for distraction, and drank in the company of its frequenters enormous quantities of grog and red wine, with two cognacs in between. The two cognacs went by the name of "a pair of flannel trousers." There he found his old friends—Hans von Sembritzky, who had drunk heavily since his marriage; the elder Otzen, a melancholic, shy personage by day, but at night, after the second bottle, a wild singer of comic songs; Herr von Stolt, always on the scent of women, and hoping, through associating with Leo, to approach Felicitas once more.

Nothing had leaked out here of the misfortune which had befallen Uhlenfelde. Even Ulrich's sudden departure had called for no remark, because, as one of the social magnates of the district, his absences were frequent. The only person who knew was Dr. Senftleben, who attended Felicitas. This taciturn old bachelor, who enjoyed the reputation of being a cynic, and was much feared in consequence, was in the habit of devouring his supper in a corner of the Prussian Crown, and going away without saying good night to any one.

Leo, however, ventured to speak to him one night, and asked what was the matter with Felicitas.

"Nothing," answered the doctor, and seized his hat.

"But she is in bed, and you see her every day."

"She has what you call 'anxious' fever, Herr von Sellenthin. She is taking morphine in raspberry syrup—plenty of raspberry, but no bromide; that is too depressing. Good evening, Herr von Sellenthin."

On the morning of the fifth day, when Leo was dressing, Lizzie's old factotum rushed in upon him, sobbing and wringing her hands.

"What has happened, Minna?"

"Misfortune upon misfortune! Paulchen is dead, the gnädige Frau has taken poison in her despair, and, though still alive, is unconscious. The doctor has been sent for, but for God's sake come, gnädiger Herr, for everything is topsy-turvy, and I don't know what to do."

Leo felt as if cold water were running down his back, and he reeled against the wall.

"It can't be true, it can't be true," was his first thought. Then he said to himself, "You must put on your boots;" and he went about the simple task with a feeling as if in another minute he would lack the strength to accomplish it. Suddenly he burst into a loud derisive laugh, and the old woman crept into a corner, frightened at the sound.

After all it was only what was to be expected. It was fate. The child dead; Felicitas dying; Ulrich, with his weak heart, unable to bear the blow; and then it would be his own turn.

He glanced at the spot where his weapons hung. The bullet that would do the work was waiting for him. He stretched himself, and a murderous lust overcame him for a moment; then he finished his dressing, and, leaving the old woman panting behind, he tore across the snow-covered fields and over the frozen river to Uhlenfelde, and as he ran he asked himself, "Do I love her?" and the answer was, "No; love isn't like this. I am not even sorry for her. My guilt, if she dies, seems far worse than her death itself. But the child, and Ulrich—in thinking of them too, the hideous spectre of his own guilt reared itself, grimacing, before him.

Everything in the courtyard at Uhlenfelde was the same as usual, which surprised him. He expected, at least, that the barns would be on fire.

A two-horsed sleigh was waiting at the door. "Who is there?" he inquired of old Wilhelm, who, red and half frozen, touched his fur cap with his customary imperturbable air of deference.

"The doctor, gnädiger Herr."

Leo met him in the hall, hurrying, after the manner of busy doctors, to his conveyance.

"How is she, doctor?" he asked, detaining him.

"As well as can be expected," was the curt reply.

"What does that mean? That all danger is past?"

"It means that the baroness is simply suffering from an attack of bile, which I don't envy her."

"Hasn't she taken poison?"

"Poison! Humph! My dear sir, it depends on what you call poison. The baroness may have had the intention of taking her life, I dare say. But she went the wrong way about it. She drank her toothache drops, Herr von Sellenthin, a mixture of ether, alcohol, and oil, not exactly unpleasant to the taste, but one that few would be of sufficiently tough constitution not to feel some disagreeable effects from imbibing. Now she seems to have slept herself out, but will probably suffer a day or two yet from a disordered stomach. Good day to you, Herr von Sellenthin."

He got into the sleigh, bowed, and drove off.

Leo felt disgusted, and half disappointed; the most sacred spot in his heart seemed to have been rudely tampered with.

The tragedy had become something very like a farce. Still, the child, the dear child, was dead. There was no getting over that. The wrath which always flamed up within him against this woman, at moments when his will was weakest and most impotent to meet her, hardened into cold aversion. He could have strangled her on

account of those toothache drops. Everything, even the desire to die, became in her hands a miserable petty fraud. But the child was dead, and could not be brought back to life.

He asked a maid-servant, who was apparently affected by the general alarm in the household, whether her mistress was visible. She answered shyly that she would go and see, and ran upstairs.

Meanwhile, old Minna, coughing and sobbing, came in at the front door, and asked, wringing her hands, if the gracious one was still alive.

Leo turned his back on her without deigning to answer, and she hobbled on up the stairs as fast as she could. He was alone, and it seemed a long time before any one came. He paced up and down between the pillars, where he and Ulrich as boys had played hide-and-seek, and he thought, "What shame have she and I brought on your house!" It would have come almost as a consolation if some one had hounded him with a horse-whip out at the door, the threshold of which his feet had desecrated.

Instead, old Minna returned with beaming eyes and champing jaws, and declared joyously that the gracious little mistress was better again, and the gracious little mistress wished to see him.

He clenched his teeth and followed the old woman upstairs. What he wanted to say to her he did not know; he was only aware of a dull desire to lay his fingers about her throat and choke her. So bitterly, at that moment, did he hate her.

Minna led him into her bedroom. He had not entered it since the days at Fichtkampen. A wave of the opoponax perfume met him as the door opened, and he found himself in a rosy gloaming, penetrated here and there by a ray of hard, cold daylight. He felt as if he were plunged into a warm scented bath, and a cover shut down upon him. He remained stationary by the door, and breathed quickly.

The old hag caught him by the sleeve and pulled him forward towards the bed where she lay. Her face was illumined by the light from the window, and her pillow gleamed round her like an aureole, while the rest of the bed was bathed in purple, semi-darkness.

"She has arranged this *mise en scène*," he thought.

Her face had a waxen hue; there were dark rims round her eyes, which, from beneath their half-closed heavy lids, looked at him without recognition or intelligence. It seemed to him that the effects of her drug-taking had not entirely passed off.

He approached her bedside on tip-toe; the thawing snow fell from his boots and left little discoloured streams on the carpet.

"Felicitas?"

She raised her left hand and motioned to him to come nearer,

and he dragged a chair close to the bed. There was a night-table standing beside it, with bottles and phials of every description; one was empty, and labelled, "Cure for toothache—*Not to be taken.*" This admonition must have induced her to drink it.

"Felicitas?" he repeated.

Then she slowly raised her large dim eyes and stared at him, while a bitter smile played about her mouth.

"Felicitas, pull yourself together," he exhorted, feeling uneasy.

She stammered Paulchen's name, and looked into vacancy again. A reflection of death seemed to lie on this white face, rigid from anguish.

Leo would have sunk on his knees beside her, deeply moved and anxious, had not the doctor's words hardened and steeled him against her.

"Leo?" she whispered, without looking at him.

"What can I do for you?"

"Are you my friend?"

"Of course. You know that I am."

"Leo, I can't go on living. Leo, you must get me poison."

He took comfort from her words. After all, then, she had seriously wished to take her life. For that he thanked her from the bottom of his heart.

A quiver of pain passed over her drawn features, which the grief of the last few days had lengthened and pinched. Her face was now marked by lines, which made it look older, but gave it more character. This was not the pink-and-white laughing face of the syren who lured him on to the edge of a precipice, but the woe-struck face of a madonna who had endured and come through much tribulation.

And it was fitting that the partner of his guilt should be thus. He felt for the first time how thoroughly she belonged to him, and his hate gradually evaporated.

"Don't sin against yourself, Felicitas," he said, for the sake of saying something.

"Sin against myself!" she repeated, speaking in a low, hopeless monotone. "Oh, my God! As if there was anything worse for me to do! Could I sin more than I have done? My little Paul is dead, and I am still alive. I sentenced my child to death, and am allowed to live. Matricide; isn't that the most horrible of crimes? How can I go through life with such a burden of guilt weighing upon me? How can any one who cares for me wish me to do it?"

"Matricide!" he exclaimed in bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"I know what I mean," she said, and smiled.

A cold shudder ran through him. This woman's brain must be

unbalanced by grief; she was going out of her mind. Her fingers groped on the counterpane.

"Where is your hand?" she whispered. "Give me your hand. I implore you to give me your hand."

He stretched it towards her mechanically, and she grasped it in her hot moist palm.

"Lean down to me," she whispered on, "and I will tell you in your ear how it happened."

He inclined his head as she commanded, till it was close to her mouth.

"You remember that evening you came before Christmas?" she continued—"that was the hour when I sacrificed my boy's life to you. When we were warming ourselves at the furnace in the greenhouse, it was then that he died."

"You are talking deliriously, Felicitas!" he exclaimed, drawing himself erect.

"Hush!" she said, pulling him down to her again. "They may be listening at the door, and no one must know this but you and I. It was three days before Christmas. I was doing up his presents, and there wasn't much time. For I had sent him far, far away for your sake, and kept from Ulrich how unhappy he was at school; for your sake I did that too. But I wanted him to have his Christmas presents, but in the middle you came in. And then I forgot everything else. I thought no more about Christmas, or my child. My whole soul was filled with you. I wanted nothing else but to go away with you into some corner where no one could see us or hear us. And when you were gone, I was in a sort of mad ecstasy. I ran up and down stairs. I stood by the window looking towards Halewitz half the night through, and then I sat by the stove, and stared into the fire and thought, 'This is how he and I sat beside the furnace.' And at last when I came to my senses it was too late—too late."

"Why too late?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yesterday morning," she answered, "Ulrich's telegram came, and last night the letter. Everything is in the letter. It is somewhere in the room. Look for it."

He rose, with faltering steps, and with unsteady fingers fumbled about in search of the fatal letter. But he could not find it. He ransacked the whole apartment that lay before him in a mysterious twilight, with its luxurious appointments, its silken cushions and covers, its veiled mirrors and countless silver and ivory toilette articles. He wandered from one piece of furniture to another, and while he gazed in stupefied astonishment at all the glittering knick-knacks, he asked himself what it was he was looking for. But a voice from the bed reminded him.

"Look in the dressing-room; it may be there."

Ah, the letter—of course, the letter. He opened the door to which she pointed, and found himself in a small room so brilliant and light that it hurt his eyes. The floor was of porcelain tiles, and he saw on the left a bath with steps leading down to it, on the right a marble table surrounded by a threefold full-length mirror, before which were strewn yet more articles of the toilette of crystal and tortoiseshell in every conceivable design.

"How *he* must hate all this show and luxury!" he thought. And then his glance wandered through a door standing wide open opposite him. He saw a plain camp-bedstead covered by a white crochet counterpane, with a deer-skin rug on the bare boards beside it. Photographs in dark frames were on the wall, and amongst them, staring at him with laughing eyes and plump cheeks, his own. He groaned aloud, and, putting his hands before his face, flew back into the perfumed, purple prison.

"Have you got the letter?" she asked.

"No."

"Did you look everywhere?"

"I don't know; I think so."

"Leo, what's the matter with you?"—her voice trembled with anxiety.

"The matter with me?" he cried. "Only this: I am ashamed of myself—ashamed! ashamed!" He drew himself up, and then flung himself down on his knees beside the bed. She raised herself on the pillows and laid her hand on his head, while her eyes filled with tears.

"My poor, poor boy," she said, "you are broken-hearted already, and yet you don't know nearly all."

"What more is there?" he asked, shaken with emotion.

"The letter says," she continued, "that all the others got their presents from parents and friends in time for the distribution. Only his table was empty. And he couldn't believe it—couldn't believe that his mother had forgotten him. And when the rest were playing round the Christmas-tree, he slipped out unseen, without hat or overcoat. He must go to the post-office, he said, to inquire whether mamma had sent nothing. Not the soldiers and the cannons, and the pocket inkstand, and all the things that he had wanted so badly, and which mamma had promised him? But he couldn't find the post-office, and ran on and on over the open fields in a snowstorm, *without cap and overcoat*, and because he could not believe that his mother had forsaken him (for your sake, Leo), he died—died."

She pressed her forehead against the bowed head of the kneeling man, sobbing bitterly, and clung to his shoulders. And so they cried together and would not be comforted. When at last they lifted their

heads they looked into each other's eyes, astonished and questioning. Was he this man? Was she this woman? It seemed as if their common sorrow had made them new creatures, and linked them as one for all time in guilt and the wretched consequence of their sin. She smiled at him inconsolably, but at the same time she was almost happy.

"Lizzie, we are lost," he murmured.

"Yes, we are lost," she said, still smiling, and then he left her.

XXXIV

ON the first Sunday of the New Year, Ulrich alighted at the station at Münsterberg, after seeing the grave close over his step-son. He had decided, after long consideration, to have the boy buried in the place where he died, and if his wife felt herself equal to the strain, to have the body removed later to be interred in the family vault of the Rhadens at Fichtkampen.

Felicitas had not spared him any of the details of her despair, illness, and attempted suicide, and had painted all in the darkest colours. She had too much to conceal to be able to express her grief simply and sincerely. The task lay before her of excusing herself, as far as was possible, of any blame in her child's death, and of presenting the whole unhappy affair to Ulrich and the world and to herself, tricked out in the guise of romance.

Above all, it had never occurred to her to spare her husband. The letters she had written him from her bed with a feverish hand were full of endless laments that they had ever sent the boy so far away to school, which strengthened the pangs of remorse that already tortured his sensitive soul.

With the instinct of self-preservation, she had tried to shunt the responsibility for what had happened on Ulrich's shoulders, in the same way as she had blamed Leo as an accomplice, so that Ulrich's easily disturbed conscience began to accuse him of being the cause of all the misery.

"She was only like an irresponsible child," he said to himself, "following the whim of the moment. I ought to have thought of that and have remained firm in opposing her, even when it was the fate of her own flesh and blood that she was deciding upon."

And then, what was worst of all was, that she had done it for him and him alone. So that he might continue to enjoy the friendship of the man who bore on him the stain of having killed the child's father, that child had been sent into banishment to meet his death. A sacrifice so cruel and unnatural had, as it was bound to be, been avenged, and, as things had shaped themselves, it had all been of no avail. The object for which the stupendous sacrifice had been made was not attained.

For he could no longer shut his eyes to the fact that he was losing his friend, his boyhood's comrade and well-beloved who, ever since he could remember, had been first in his thoughts, who had been his pride and glory and rock of strength, who seemed to embody all the health and physical power that fate had denied to himself.

He no longer understood him. The laws that governed his emotions were strange to him, and what once had seemed to him like a perfect, rushing harmony of Mother Nature's, now was like a shrieking confusion of discordant notes.

Whether it was himself who had changed so much, or the other, he couldn't say; he was only clear on one point, that every fresh utterance of Leo's estranged and hurt him.

No one knew better than his friend how dear the small step-son had been to his heart; but on the day of the funeral he had got a letter from Leo so stiffly and frigidly expressed, that it might have been the conventional condolences of an absolute stranger.

It was indeed a melancholy home-coming for Ulrich. No one met him at the station. But the station-master, who recognised the baron as he flashed his lantern upon him, helped him out of the railway-carriage, and spoke a few words of respectful sympathy.

The old coachman, Wilhelm, seated on the box, wiped away his tears at his master's approach, and when he laid his hand on his shoulder and said to him in a low voice, "Ah, Wilhelm, we shall not see our boy again," he nearly let the reins slip out of his weather-beaten hands from emotion.

Ulrich had brought back with him Paulchen's trunks and play-boxes, and these were piled high on the back seat of the sleigh. Among them were the two big Christmas parcels of toys which the little fellow had looked out for so expectantly on Christmas Eve, and gone in search of. They had been delivered the next day by the pleased postman.

The sleigh glided on through the moonless night. On the plain the whiteness of the snow made a faint glimmer; the poplars bordering the road emerged in blurred outline one after the other out of the dark. Ulrich fancied that from behind each tree Paulchen must appear and call to him, "Take me home. I am afraid; so afraid. Take me home, please."

Then came the long bridge which had been Paulchen's delight. It was a hundred and fifty paces in length, and had balustrades of black and white palings, on which he had always said that he wanted to climb when he was "big enough." Underneath the bridge, where it was often dry enough to walk, there was an echo, and when a carriage passed overhead it was like the rolling of thunder.

And a little further on was the chief wonder of the road, a wind-

mill that stood on a roof. Think of it! a windmill high up on a roof! Forlornly it spread its snowy wings now, like the ghost of a giant stretching its arms into the grey night sky.

So the drive continued till the demesne of Uhlenfelde came in sight. Here there seemed scarcely an inch of land that was not sanctified by some association with the dead boy. How gloomy and desolate were the wide fields! They looked as if a bright day could never dawn again to bathe them in sunshine; as if eternal winter had settled on the world.

He looked forward to the prospect that awaited him with shuddering. He dreaded alike his work and his leisure.

Then he thought of Felicitas, and was ashamed of thinking so much of his own feelings. The task before him was to coax with gentle patience and tactful caution, a despairing woman, slowly back to the ordinary walks of life.

A burst of compassionate love for her gushed forth from his soul. He felt as if she and Leo were a legacy left to him by the poor little fellow who had died so tragically.

Yes, with Leo too he must try and set things right. He would go to him, look him straight in the eyes, clasp his hand, and say—

"Man, speak out, and over the dead tell me honestly, what is the barrier that has grown up between you and me?"

The sleigh turned through the courtyard gateway. The servants and labourers lined the drive in black groups, and in silent sympathy bared their heads. All had foregone their beer, and none had spent the sabbath hours of repose at home with wife and child, because they all wished by their presence there to show him how they felt for him in his bereavement.

The sleigh drew up. His heart beat faster, for he feared Felicitas would come out to meet him; but she did not come. She was waiting for him in her corner-boudoir, standing erect by the writing-table. Her deep mourning-dress made her look taller. She appeared to him almost majestic, or was it her sorrow which invested her in his eyes with majesty? yet the expression of the haggard eyes, which looked bigger than ever because her face had grown so thin, was not one of sorrow. Rather did it appear to be anxiety and horror that gazed out of them, as if she feared being surprised in a defenceless position.

"Lizzie," he stammered, holding out his arms to her.

She dropped her lids, and leant against the wall for support. He drew her head to his breast and led her to an easy-chair, murmuring over her, softly, words of comfort. All the love with which his heart was overflowing he lavished upon her. He spoke of their belonging to each other more completely than ever before, of the sacred hallowing influence the death of the innocent child

would have upon both their lives. He promised to give her for the future boundless confidence, most fervent trust, and tenderest consideration; all, indeed, that he had given her for years, which for years she had accepted with smiling indifference, and without heeding the giver.

So soon as it dawned on her that he was not in the least disposed to make her responsible and call her to account, her nervous rigidity relaxed; she slid on to the carpet, and, burying her head on his knees, sobbed bitterly.

He went on speaking to her in the same soothing, gentle tone. She wrung her hands, and beat her forehead. For an instant her maternal grief, which in spite of everything was strong within her, had full sway without any *arrière pensé* interrupting it. But her expressions were so wildly exaggerated, that soon even her grief became artificial, and the last remnant of pure and noble sentiment she had possessed was destroyed.

Gradually she grew calmer, and she let her arms fall to her sides. A lassitude that was almost pleasant overcame her. She let him raise her and lay her on the couch. She felt the burning desire that children feel after a whipping—to be pitied and consoled.

"Oh, Ulrich," she murmured, "what I have suffered!"

He started. A sense of disappointment suddenly damped his sympathy. Surely at this hour her first words should not have been words of pity for herself.

He said nothing; but his eyes wandered about the room as if he were pondering on some new experience. Supper was announced. The officials who generally sat at table with them had tactfully begged to be excused to-night. Husband and wife were alone.

The tea-kettle hummed, and the bronze hanging-lamp shed a soft lustre on the snowy damask and gleaming silver.

Felicitas busied herself about his creature-comforts, acting on an impulse to pay off the gigantic debt she owed him with the small coin of little kindnesses and attentions. She prepared his sardines in his favourite way, cut him the thinnest bread-and-butter, and poured two spoonfuls of rum in his tea—a pick-me-up he was obliged sometimes to resort to. She put a cushion at his back, and drew the shade low over the lamp, so that his "poor tired eyes" should not be dazzled.

He watched her in painful amazement. He would have preferred satisfying his hunger to-night silently and unobserved, like a dog, and not to have been reminded that there were such things as dainty living and tit-bits in the world.

"How can she think of these trifling matters, when a few moments ago she was rolling on the floor in despair?" he asked himself.

With a fine instinct she divined what was passing in his mind, and changing her tack, began again to give a harrowing account of her own sufferings.

"No, Ulrich," she said, "you can't conceive what torture it was to me to think of you alone at his grave: not to be there to help you, and stand by you. But it could not be helped. The doctor gave strict orders that I was not to attempt the journey; besides, I was very ill; a little more and you would not have found me alive."

She paused, expecting him to question her about the attempted suicide; but as he was silent she led the conversation round to it herself.

"Are you still angry with me, dearest?" she asked.

"Why should I be angry?"

"Because I acted so wickedly, and, in the first shock of my grief, doubted God and His mercy, so that I believed it was impossible to go on living. Ah, Ulrich, if you knew the state I was in then, you would, I am sure, forgive me."

"I have nothing to forgive, Felicitas."

"But you say it so severely, Ulrich. I know, of course, that I have committed a great sin, that one ought to endure patiently any misery God inflicts on us; but I was so alone, so utterly alone—you away, no one to turn to. First, I thought of throwing myself in the river. That would have been the quickest; but the river was frozen. Next, I thought I would roam about the fields and freeze to death—and I did stay out half one night, and it didn't kill me, and so I came home, and snatched up some poison—the first that came to hand—and drank, drank. It was like liquid fire in my throat, and I saw dancing suns before my eyes, and then I fell, and I don't know what happened afterwards. Do you see, Uli, what a terrible time your poor little wife has gone through?"

In her longing to hear him console her, she began to cry once more. But the desired consolation was not forthcoming.

"Ah! how much better it would have been," she lamented further, "if I had never awoke. What is life? Nothing but sorrow, wretchedness, and misunderstanding. When one's heart is torn, one is always most alone. Ah, Uli! for you, too, it would have been best. Would you have mourned for me a little?"

He did not answer. He looked at her, and looked again, and she turned him to stone. He had been waiting for the bitter cry of maternal anguish. But she talked of herself, and only of herself. His eyes beheld her in her fair loveliness, rocking herself to and fro on her chair. The rounded curves of her slender figure were set off by the close-fitting mourning-gown. Her masses of curly golden hair shone like a halo above her forehead and small rosy ears. The perpetual smile, half-melancholy, half-injured, on the small face,

seemed to say that she would like to smile all death and pain out of existence. He was conscious of a slight repulsion as he examined her, and was ashamed of it the next moment. Why was he suddenly become so embittered? Had he not always known that patience was very necessary in dealing with this fair, light creature?

And in a voice more of reproach than blame, he said, "Have you no questions to ask about the boy, Felicitas?"

She held out her hands in horrified entreaty.

"Not to-day, dearest," she implored. "Not to-day. It would excite us both too much. I have pictured it all a thousand times over. All the dreadful scenes have floated before my eyes by night and day, and I am tired, oh, so tired, I crave for sleep—for one real good long sleep—and never to wake again. How beautiful that would be!"

Shutting her eyes, she laid herself across the arm of the chair, so that her full creamy throat dimpled over the tight folds of black chiffon that encircled it.

Again he had to struggle with a feeling of disgust; but with a quiet determination, characteristic of his methodical nature, he adhered to his purpose of giving her an account of Paul's last hours.

"Our feelings ought not to make cowards of us, Lizzie," he said. "I know you must have suffered much. I should have known it, even if you had not told me. But it is in vain to try and spare yourself this. Our thoughts will always be returning to it, and not till you have drunk your cup of sorrow to the dregs can you hope to get any truly refreshing rest."

"Very well, speak, then," she said, cowering together, as if resigning herself to her fate. "Tell me what you like."

But when he saw the terror with which she contemplated hearing his story, the words froze on his lips, and he felt as if he could never impart to her the painful and sacred impressions that were so fresh in his memory. He had expected that she would have drunk in all with passionate eagerness, and would have questioned him about every minute that he had passed by Paul's deathbed, till she was in complete possession of the whole scene. Instead, she shrank from it, in a vulgar fear of her nerves being upset.

Unmotherly, almost inhuman, did her conduct appear. Now, he felt that to speak of the child's quiet, pathetic death to the mother would be profanation. Though there had been no tie of blood between them, he had belonged to him in life and in death. This woman from whose womb he had sprung, this smiling, frightened woman, who only thought of her own discomfort, and wished to be pitied for herself, had become a stranger—a stranger to her child, and a stranger to him. He saw, with horror, the gulf that she set

between him and her, which no seductive charm, no flattering little speeches, could ever bridge again.

"Perhaps you are right, Felicitas," he said coldly. "We will leave it for the present; it may be too sad a subject and too exciting for you."

"Ah, how good you are!" she whispered gratefully; "you can feel for your poor, heart-broken wife."

And as she had often done when she wanted to bewitch him with a cheap endearment, she stretched over to him and pillowed her head against his arm, looking into his face with ecstatically uplifted eyes.

He submitted passively, and glanced down in cold astonishment on the pale, pretty features on which an almost coquettish smile was now playing. In a flash he seemed to see through the thousand machinations with which, for years, she had chained him to her chariot-wheel: the allurements with which she had awakened desires within him without any intention of satisfying them, and the extravagant caprices, obeying which had weakened his will and degraded his intellect. The whole tissue, woven of laughing selfishness and self-seeking affability and mock *naïveté*, now fell away, showing the being he had humbly worshipped in her naked unreality and insincerity.

He could not guess that all she said and did at the moment was a kind of veiled apology, for in her mania to excuse her past faults she had revealed herself to him in her true colours. He saw all that was hollow and vain and false in her, without understanding why she prevaricated and lied. They sat on together for another hour. The table was cleared, but the spirit-lamp still hummed. The antique Dutch clock in the corner kept up its solemn and deliberate tick. Now and then a shower of snow-flakes whirled against the window and the sashes rattled gently. A profound, dreamful peace seemed to have descended on the apartment, a peace well ordained to bring healing to two wounded hearts.

Felicitas, all unsuspecting, yet inwardly anxious, continued to make herself charming and amiable. She spoke of the sympathy shown her by friends and neighbours, the countless letters of condolence which she had received, the many callers she had refused to see. She even made plans for the future, and promised all sorts of wonderful things to comfort and distract him. He listened with grave courteous attention; and in every word he found confirmation of his new reading of her character. His eyes wandered round the room. He saw the lights and shadows dancing on the walls; the dear old objects amidst which he had been brought up, which he would have bequeathed to his step-son; so soon as he could have legally adopted him. He listened to the

ticking of the clock and all the familiar sounds which in peaceful evening hours are the music of happy homes.

But now everything seemed different, everything was strange, unreal, almost disquieting.

"Away!" a voice cried within him. "Flee from this house which is no longer yours." And when the watchmen whistled outside the hour of ten, he rose. His torture had lasted long enough. She offered her forehead to be kissed with a weary sigh; but he bowed low and kissed her hand instead.

"And you really aren't angry with me?" she asked in a whisper, her conscience stirring again.

He shook his head, smiling. The scorn which had taken possession of his soul made him composed and frigid. He left her, and as the door closed behind him she threw up her hands and exclaimed—

"Thank God!"

The next morning Ulrich explained to his wife that urgent business called him to Königsberg, where the committee for the Agricultural Exhibition was holding its meetings, and it was uncertain whether he would return to Uhlenfelde before the opening of the Reichstag.

Felicitas was at first a little taken aback, then readily acquiesced.

The parting of husband and wife was friendly but undemonstrative. Felicitas indeed regarded the separation so much in the light of a deliverance that she forgot to act a part.

When the sleigh reached the top of the dyke, Ulrich halted, and took a long look across at Halewitz, whose hoary old castle seemed to nod a greeting at him amidst its snow-covered barns and out-buildings. Though his heart cried out for his friend, he was afraid to meet him, afraid that if he did the last precious thing left to him on earth might slip through his fingers.

XXXV

IN these days Leo became an *habitué* of the Prussian Crown. He was received there with open arms by a jovial company, according to whose standard he was a thoroughly "decent chap," being capable of drinking as hard as most.

The handful of Uhlan officers could talk big, but when it came to putting their prowess to the test by a genuine prolonged carousal, they could not be depended on, and dropped out of the ranks before the struggle had really half begun. The truth was that the colonel in command had strict orders to guard against any excesses, lest the demoralising civilian influence should bring the mixed garrison into disrepute.

The citizens were, on the whole, a famous crew, and as often in debt and in drink as befitted old corps students. One, it was true, held himself aloof, because he was a Jew and feared baiting. But his place was filled by a newspaper reporter, likewise a Jew, who adopted opposite tactics, and, with the plasticity of his race, had become the most convivial of the party and the wildest of a wild lot.

The circle was sometimes joined by a couple of landed proprietors, unable to put in a regular appearance owing to their wives and the distance of their homes, and whose presence, when they did come to drink away dull hours, added to the gaiety of the topers.

As beer and red wine were considered little stronger than innocent ditch-water, a particularly piquant kind of punch was the beverage chosen, by means of which the object desired was most quickly accomplished. This was an appalling mixture of cognac and port-wine, with sugar added, and it was carried to the table piping hot. The man had never been met with yet who could hold out against the peculiar effects of this devilish concoction. And every time that the punch was brewing on the kitchen fire, the waiters and ostlers received orders to hold themselves in readiness to act the part of good Samaritan to the guests.

Nevertheless, the milieu of the Prussian Crown was a little too steady and staid for some tastes. Certain respectable worthies

came there to read the newspapers, have a game of cribbage or chess, and their request for quiet had perforce to be regarded.

Another drawback was the lack of female society. At other resorts in Münsterberg, where the more plebeian revellers sought their distractions with indifferent beer and good grog, were to be found ladies with whom one could chat behind the bar.

At Engelmann's, for instance, was the barmaid known as the fair Ida; and Gretchen, nicknamed the "Toad," ogled through the window of Gambrinus's which was generally empty; while, if one wanted variety, there was the Restaurant Königgrätz, where the young ladies came and went in rapid succession. Johann, the Halewitz coachman, had waited many an hour, of late, freezing on his box before the curtained windows of these hostels, and he and Christian had entered into a conspiracy together to screen their master and hide his ruin from the world; they invented a hundred excuses for his late home-coming, and lied to every one who questioned them on the subject. Yet, in spite of that, all the servants and tenants knew their master had become a drunkard, and spent his nights in debauchery. And there was no surprise after the scene of Christmas Eve, which had impressed itself so deeply on their memory. In the castle itself the evil was felt without the cause of it being clearly understood. Its inmates were in terror of Leo's sudden outbursts of temper, his growling and grumbling. When his behaviour was tolerable, the poor women would venture hopefully on drawing a smile or a kind word from him, but were generally roughly repulsed, and would retire from the attempt with tears of shame and indignation in their eyes.

Dear, sweet-tempered grandmamma suffered no less than Hertha, and Elly and her fat pug between them got well bullied.

But there was no one who suffered as much as himself. Despite his efforts to be a fiend, he remained nothing but a poor wretch, bleeding from the scourgings of self-contempt; a martyr to feverish longing and the craving of the senses, seeking mental and physical exhaustion by plunging into one soul-deadening dissipation after the other.

The idea of making an end of himself grew stronger day by day. He played with his despairing resolves as a child does with its toys. Sometimes he felt as if he must commit murder, and a favourite occupation of his distorted mind was to picture himself laying hands on innocent people who had done, and never would do, him any harm, but whom in his suspicious irritability he chose to regard as enemies and slanderers. Yes, murder some one, and afterwards go to gaol and the gallows; that would be peace and salvation at last. He had seen no more of Felicitas since that memorable morning. She had twice written to him, but he had evaded answering her.

The last remnants of his strength of will were used to keep up this cowardly attitude. He had heard from Ulrich too, begging him to forgive him for not having looked him up the last time he was at home. This made him laugh his harshest laugh. If they had met, what a delightful meeting it would have been!

It was at this time that something happened to rouse him from the contemplation of his own degradation. His old friend, fat and honest Hans von Sembritzky, drew him cautiously one day at the Prussian Crown into a corner and said, puffing and short of breath—

"A word with you, old man. Although it is not a very serious matter in itself, and may not mean much, you ought to look after your little sister Elly a bit. She is just at the age, you know, when girls do silly things. At any rate, it would be wise to keep writing-materials out of her way; ink is rather a dangerous medium for flirtation."

Leo, half alarmed and half annoyed, demanded an explanation.

"You know Pastor Brenckenberg's cub, who has been loafing about at home for more than a year, doing no good? Swaggering corps student, boasts of his colours and his clubs; but to what purpose? The fellow gets more and more dissipated and dissolute, and he dare not show his nose now in any decent house; even the bailiffs are sick of him. And no wonder, as——"

Leo interrupted with a brusque suggestion that he should come to the point.

"Well, my bailiff Lawrence, a thoroughly honest and reliable person, told me yesterday that the Kandidate Brenckenberg had been passing round his love-letters from little Elly Sellenthin in a beer cellar at Münsterberg, and had also read passages from them aloud. Some of the company had been amused, others indignant. In short, the affair has caused a scandal."

Leo felt a sense of cruel triumph mingle with his rage. He had wanted some object that he could crush, pulverize, and annihilate, and here he had one to his hand. Hans was astonished at the loud laughter with which he greeted his information, and a little hurt.

"You don't seem to take the matter seriously," he remarked.

"Wait a bit, old fellow; only wait," said he, and clapped him on the shoulder.

Then he sat down and drank deeply, while his friend shook his head and privately deplored his rapid degeneration.

At first Leo intended to give his sister a scolding, but when on the following day he was face to face with her, he had lost the desire to humiliate her. Why draw forth tears and wailings from this child when the youth was in his power? Better reserve himself for that encounter.

He confined himself, therefore, to taking hold of her by the arm,

and teazing her by a hundred taunts and gibes. He felt a kind of malicious sympathy with her. Had she, after all, done anything very bad? He, who was on the high-road to ruin and fully conscious of what he was doing, could not be hard on this little fool for stumbling in the blindness of her youthful pursuit of enjoyment. So when he had tormented her sufficiently, he kissed her and let her go. This had happened shortly after the dinner-hour was over. A little later, Hertha, pale from suppressed excitement, came to him with a letter from Johanna. His eldest sister wrote that she had things of urgent importance to speak to him about, and prayed that on the receipt of her note he would come to her immediately.

"She may congratulate herself that I can obey her summons," he thought.

But in spite of his feigned scorn and indifference, he knew that he was afraid of Johanna, or, if not of her, of the discomfort with which she always threatened him. For a reminder from Johanna that she existed meant nothing pleasant. A sudden current of vigorous life shot through his limbs and told him how much he could still hate. He hated her, and Felicitas, and every one. But her most of all.

He put on his fur coat and strode over the park. It was nearly four o'clock. The pale winter sun was sinking, and scarcely able to illumine the monotonous greyness of the snow-covered fields with its feeble parting rays, though here and there there trembled over the landscape a crystalline-blue reflection. The shrubberies seemed like black crouching figures on the ground, and between the highest straggling branches the light peeped like a thousand round eyes.

The girls had made a slide on the snowy surface of the carp pond, and it spanned it like a narrow dark ribbon from bank to bank. Absently Leo slid along the slide, and considered himself lucky that he got to the other side without a fall. He recalled the sultry afternoon on which he had smoked his cigar here, stretched out on the seat, and had awaited with perfect calm the interview with his sister. The seat was now cushioned with snow, on which the footmarks of birds had made a star-like pattern. He felt inclined to throw himself down there again in spite of the snow, and try to recover the equable frame of mind that he had been in then.

"Ah, but she won't get off so well this time," he thought, and he made his way along the overgrown path that led to the dower house.

She stood at the window waiting for him. As he entered the room, she turned round and, biting her lips, gave him a cold glassy stare. She had aged still more since he had last seen her, and seemed more gaunt and wasted. The flesh on her throat hung in folds, and the sharp line of pain from mouth to chin completely

marred the oval of her face. The greyish side light which fell upon her gave a chalk-like hue to her complexion peculiar to people who are fitting themselves for the next world by ascetic exercises, and to those who have imposed on themselves some great mental strain.

"So this is where you prefer to dwell," he said, and looked round him.

He saw the white crucifix in its corner, with the *prie Dieu* in front of it, and heavy pieces of furniture on which the fading daylight lay unbecomingly. The odour of poor children which the scholars had left behind them almost suffocated him, and with it was mingled the smell of dried grasses and mouldy hymn-books.

"Please sit down," Johanna said, without offering him her hand.

There was a weary, sad, almost tearful sound in her voice which was new to him. Also the manner in which she went to the sofa and slowly sank amongst the cushions seemed the action of one physically weak and broken in spirit.

"I have asked you to come here," she began, "so that you shall know God's decision with regard to us. For what is about to happen is the judgment of God. I have no will in the matter, except to do His bequest. But you shall not be able to reproach me with having dealt this blow from behind in an underhand way."

Of course she was threatening him; he had expected nothing else.

"Well, what is it now?" he inquired, suppressing his rising antagonism. "What do you want of me, and will it cost me much? You pious folks have your own prices, I know."

His scoffing raillery had no effect upon her.

"Look here, Leo," she said, in a still more tired and subdued voice, "I am sorry for you. I would have given much to be able to save you and all of us, for you have involved us all in your ruin. But there is no contending against God's law, and He has spoken. The child is dead. Do you know why the child died?"

"Leave the child out of it," he murmured. "What has the child to do with you?"

"That I will tell you, Leo," she replied, stretching her languid arm towards the crucifix. "On that spot she sentenced the child to death; and she did it for your sake."

He felt as if some one had struck him with open hand on the forehead. He tried to speak, but his thoughts were in a whirl. Only a strangled laugh rose from his throat.

Was this embittered sister of charity in league with the devil, that she could divine human secrets and see into the future? For a moment a deathlike stillness reigned in the oppressive, over-heated room, which was filled now with the shadows of falling dusk. Johanna kept her eyes fixed stonily on the dark corner where the crucifix stood out in luminous relief, like a witness of the crime.

"On that spot," Johanna went on, "she knelt and took her oath, and I believed her, for one doesn't swear falsely on the head of one's own child. And you were both warned. I let you take the sacrament together, so that you both should be quite honest in your good resolutions. Then I saw how wild you became, and I felt anxious. And the child was still alive, nothing had happened; 'but God will speak in His own good time,' I thought. And day after day I sat and waited for the child to die. Then it did die, and I knew what I wanted to know. It is useless for you to defend yourself, or deny anything, Leo; God has spoken, and I believe God before *you*."

He boiled with inarticulate wrath, scarcely knowing what words he could use to lash her with.

"What noble conduct! What sublimely noble conduct," he snarled, "to sit and wait like a cat watching for a mouse, all eager expectancy to hear of the death of an innocent child!"

"There is nothing left for me to live for," she said, with a moan. "No one wants me; I am quite superfluous—quite."

"It doesn't seem like it," he scoffed. "Why have you summoned me to come to you? Speak out. What is the blow you are holding up your sleeve?"

"Blow!" replied his sister. "Don't call it that. Say rather benefit—benefit for us all. I have kept silent from one year's end to another, and have staked everything upon it—youth, happiness, peace of mind! But now I must speak—God wills it so. God directs that I shall tell Ulrich all, so that his house may be purified again, and his eyes opened to what sort of woman his wife is, and what sort of man his friend."

He had sprung to his feet, and his hands groped towards her. For an instant his insensate fury blinded him. "Put an end to her, so that she can do no more mischief," something said within him. "Kill her rather than let her betray you."

His eyes wandered over the walls. He saw a bouquet of dusty pampas grass in a blue china jar on a bracket, a good shepherd smiling sweetly down on the lamb in his arms, and other religious lithograph prints. Slowly he collected himself.

"When do you propose to carry out your intentions?" he inquired hoarsely.

"So soon as it is necessary," she answered.

"When will it be necessary?" he eagerly questioned her again. "Ulrich is away. From Königsberg he will be going to Berlin. He can't be back before March. So till then you will have to be patient."

"I can urge him to come home," she replied in a low tone, with a tearful smile.

"That you shall not do," he cried, seizing hold of her roughly.

The room spun round. Again he saw nothing but the blood-red vapour of his fury, and through it a pair of widely opened eyes staring up at him in agonised terror. He felt a lean throat yielding to the pressure of his fingers. At that moment his sister was nothing more to him than an insect, a moth shying at the light, that could be crushed to powder in his grasp.

"You will hold your tongue," he hissed, "or I'll throttle you."

He tried to pull her up, but with a sharp hollow bang her head struck against the corner of the sofa. An expression of acute pain passed over her face, and she sank in a kneeling attitude on to the floor. Then he half regained his senses. He let go of her throat, and propped her head against the cushion. And then he tore about the room, his eyes searching in desperation every corner, as if there must be some solution concealed there as to how he was to save himself and Ulrich. The crucifix floated weirdly white in the gathering shadows. He saw the good shepherd smile, and the dusty grasses seemed to tremble.

"How can I save myself, how can I save myself?" he cried inwardly. And he felt as if the hatchet which the shadow of evil had held over his head for so many months was about to fall. But at the sight of his sister lying motionless on the ground, with her head resting against the sofa, he began to feel ashamed.

"Get up, Johanna," he begged. "It is true that I would like to kill you, but I don't want to ill-treat you."

He held out a hand to help her rise. She rejected his offer, and with difficulty seated herself again in her former position.

"Poor Leo!" she said, and there was a note of compassion in her tired voice.

"Yes, indeed poor Leo, poor Leo!" he exclaimed, planting himself before her in his consternation. "You can pity me, but you won't hesitate, nevertheless, to ruin me."

"You are ruined already," she muttered.

"And if I am, whose fault is it but yours and that cur of a priest? I'll be even with him too. You want to speak now, when neither God nor devil can do anything. But why did you not speak out at the time that Ulrich was going to take the insane step of marrying? You were the only person in the world who might have prevented the blunder. Why did you keep your mouth shut then, eh?"

She glanced at him from under her lids in furtive distress. Then a shudder swept the angular shoulders, on which her dress hung in ill-cut folds.

"I have repented. Oh! how I have repented everything—everything!" she murmured.

"Repented or no, that is not the question. When I asked you

in the summer, it was the same. You answered by evasion. I say that if you have a clear conscience, you would have answered me then, and would answer me now."

"Oh, don't torment me!" she implored, in growing anxiety, and leant far back in the corner of the sofa. And on Leo repeating his demand even more emphatically, she burst into hysterical weeping. Motionless she sat there, with the tears streaming in rivulets over her hollow cheeks.

He had never seen her look so yielding and so defenceless, and in the midst of his wrath and misery a gleam of chivalrous pity stirred within him, and he began involuntarily to speak to her in gentler tones.

"Listen, Johanna. I came here hating you very sorely, God knows. A little more, and I might have—— But you are not what you were, for all your threats. You and I are both poor bruised and broken creatures, so we may as well be frank with each other. Come, tell me what I wish to know, before it is too late."

Her tears were quenched, and she looked at him in utter mystification at the unexpected softness in his manner. So accustomed was she to regard him in the light of some wild beast, that she could hardly grasp that he meant to be kind. Gradually her eyes recovered their fixed and glassy expression, and she nodded her head mysteriously towards the crucifix in the corner. "Look at Him," she said—"near, quite near."

"At whom?"

"The Saviour."

He approached the *prie Dieu*, and gazed into the white face of the Crucified, so calm in its supreme repose, as if weary of all earthly contentions and excitement of the emotions.

"Do you see the resemblance?" asked his sister, with an almost prudish smile.

"No; to whom?"

"Oh, Leo! can't you see?" she replied, with a melancholy little attempt at playfulness. "Any child could tell you whom it is like. It is Ulrich; exactly like Ulrich!"

"Ah, really!" exclaimed Leo, and as he saw the look of half-triumphant possession in her face, the martyrdom of a lifetime was revealed to him in a flash.

"Hannah," he said, "why, if you loved him so much, did you take up with that villain Prachwitz?"

She started. "Love!" she stammered. "Who spoke of love? How can I love any one?"

"What is the use of dissimulating? Haven't you as good as confessed?" he answered.

Whereupon she threw herself back on the sofa-cushion and began

to weep again silently, as if she feared the intense sorrow of her soul being brought to light. She tried to speak, but could only articulate a confused murmur. It was not only that she had suffered, but, worst of all, she was ashamed of her suffering.

And then at last she found words sufficiently humble in which to begin her tale.

"It would sound ridiculous to say so, Leo, and you may scoff at me as much as you like, but you are right. I love him, and I have always loved him. That has been my fate, and God meant me for him—me, and me alone. For I understood his character as no one else in the world could do, not even you, Leo, with all your great friendship. If I had become his wife, I would have kissed his feet and hands. I would have watched over his poor weakly body with the tenderest care, which now languishes because no one troubles about it. But she came—I won't abuse her; she has had her punishment—and for her sake he forgot me. He ran after her in the same way as you did. And, out of defiance, I took the first man who asked me.

"When I came back here as a widow, I wondered if he would care for me then; but she had become a widow too, thanks to you, and I was embittered and wretched, and daren't hope for happiness any more. She, on the contrary, had added attractiveness and fascinations in her mourning, and seemed to say, 'Come, take me and comfort me; here I am.' I saw how he was drawn to her more and more on the pretext of compassionating her loneliness, and I looked on, paralysed with agony that I might lose him a second time. But instead of making a fight for him, I kept out of his way. And so I lost him—lost him."

She stopped, smiling faintly before her. He writhed in his anger against the fate which seemed to be crushing them both beneath its relentless heel, and felt as if he must resist it with his last strength.

His sister went on. "Then came the day when I learnt your secret, and had her in my power. But so ungovernable had my hate and jealousy become that I said to myself, if he thought so lowly of me that he could prefer that degraded creature, I would let him marry her and rue the day, as you and I should rue it. There, now you know all. I have confessed the horrible sin I committed, which I repent bitterly to this hour, and shall repent so long as my poor head holds out. But it is, oh, so tired, my head; and my knees are tired too. It can't last much longer, dear Leo."

She laid her open palms upon her temples and sank back in the corner of the sofa.

"What plans have you for the future, Johanna?" he asked.

"I? None. I shall go into a lunatic asylum."

"Hannah!" he cried.

"Yes. Don't you see that I am going mad?" she asked. "If you only knew the visions and hallucinations I have, I doubt whether you would let me go about without restraint. I have seen fiery swords, and the burning of Jerusalem; and I have seen the great Moloch, when *she* threw him little Paul as a sacrifice. Uriah's wife have I seen in *her* shape; and every night, do you know"—her eyes grew bigger as she poured out on him the horror of her sleepless nights—"every night the Saviour comes to me, and I may sit at His feet and put my fingers in His wounds; and then the whole room is full of His radiance, and hundreds and thousands of angels flap their red and blue wings like birds of paradise. That is a marvellous sight, I can assure you; but if I go on telling you more, two strange men will come and lay hold of me and drag me to a madhouse. But you won't let them do it, dear Leo, will you?" She sat upright and stroked his arm beseechingly with her outstretched hand.

He almost forgot his own position in pity for this poor wretched existence. It was true that just for a moment the thought passed through his mind that if he had her put under restraint, he would be saved. But the next he flung the idea from him in disgust. No; he too was sick and tired of life.

"Poor woman!" he said, coming nearer to her—"poor woman!" and he laid his right hand gently on her puritanically smooth head.

She looked up at him with the glance of a whipped hound, sighed deeply, and made an effort to lean her head against him. Seeing the movement, he sat down beside her and put his arm round her neck. They sat thus for a long time, clasping each other closely, their eyes fixed on the floor.

Now, when he realised how much the woman in his arms was his deadly enemy, every vestige of his hatred for her ebbed from his heart. Was she not made of the same clay as himself? She half a lunatic, he half a criminal, and both the victims of a tragic fate? The Sellenthin blood which had boiled so hotly in their veins had driven them along different paths to the same end.

He took Johanna's head caressingly between his hands, and they gazed at one another as if they could never look away. Brother and sister had found each other again in this encounter of savage fury, and in the depths of profoundest misery.

At last he kissed her on the forehead, and rose to go. "And you still feel that you must tell him?" he asked. "It is your firm resolve?"

Her features became strained, and her eyes again started and burned feverishly.

"Don't ask me," she said, in a tone of tearful obstinacy. "It is God's decree; God Himself has demanded it of me. Can I disobey

God? And it must be soon, or my statement may not be credited as rational."

"Well, then, God's will be done," he said, taking up his cap. "Good-bye, Hannah."

"Good-bye, Leo."

Outside, he began to whistle his favourite "Paloma" air. He felt that he had received his death-sentence.

XXXVI

"DIE, old boy; die—die!" a voice seemed to call to him as he walked along, and his spectral giant with the hatchet nodded assent as much as to say, "So far, so good."

There was only one alternative, and that was flight. In four-and-twenty hours he might be at Hamburg, thence take ship over the ocean, never to return.

There was a sum of three thousand marks to draw upon, the rest he must trust the Lord to provide; or, more strictly speaking, Ulrich.

Who would come and go through the accounts, appease the creditors, call in interest, and work heaven and earth to save the reputation of the disgraced fugitive? Ulrich, again; Ulrich, and no one else.

The reflection was so intolerable that it robbed him of the power of making any decision.

A written confession was out of the question, for what would become of Felicitas, exposed and betrayed, left behind in Ulrich's house?

How could he leave her in the lurch—she who clung to him with the deadly terror of a guilty woman? Besides, he was full of longing for her. There was not a fibre of his being that did not crave to possess her. He was incapable of picturing an existence without this horrible, agonising desire, which must remain for all eternity unfulfilled.

The next afternoon he set out for Uhlenfelde. He was drawn there by the effects of a sleepless night, a wretched day of dull despair, and, not least, by a malicious curiosity to know how she would take the threatened blow. If she set him free, he would start the same evening for the New World.

A groom informed him that the Baroness had gone forth alone, on foot, more than an hour ago.

Where had she gone? The man could not say. Yesterday and the day before she had done the same, and not returned home till long after dark.

His first emotion was one of unworthy, miserable jealousy, but he shook it off.

"To Münsterberg," was his command to the coachman, as he got into the sleigh.

It drove out of the courtyard, and in a few minutes he was surrounded by the snow-covered fields. It was just at this hour yesterday that he had gone to see Johanna.

The sky hung heavily over the landscape, like a brownish-grey canopy. Another fall of snow was coming, but the clouds were not yet low enough to open. Evening shadows were beginning to colour the vast expanse of monotone whiteness, and a soft wind stirred the bare brambles that flanked the ditches, and it made the remains of their dried, withered berries shiver as if they felt the cold. Through the silence rang out in stately measure the music of the moving sleigh. No other sound broke the stillness. From the hazel-wood which skirted the road for some distance, a covey of crows had slowly risen, and now hung noiselessly floating in the clouds. The pointed poplars by the roadside seemed every second to grow more black and massive.

Here he hoped to meet her, and he was not disappointed. He had scarcely turned into the wide main-road, when he saw a dark figure in flowing draperies of crape, walking towards Münsterberg. He quickly overtook her. She turned round. The wind had brought colour to her cheeks, and beneath the brim of her mourning hat, which cut a dark tricorn on the fairness of her forehead, her face looked girlishly fresh and sweet. The tired, dark-rimmed eyes alone showed that she had suffered. They shone when she saw him, and she held out her hands as of old, charmed and radiant. His soul responded to her in jubilation. He sprang out of the sleigh, and bidding the man walk the horses slowly up and down, he offered her his arm.

"What are you doing here, Felicitas?" he asked.

"I have been on the prowl for you," she whispered. "Are you angry with me for doing it?"

"Why should I be angry?" he answered. "I have just been to see you."

"At last!" she sighed, and leaned closely against him. "My whole life is nothing but one long waiting for you, Leo. I am sick with longing for you."

"And I for you," he muttered.

Her arm trembled violently in his. They were both silent for a moment, for they now knew what they had wanted to know.

Bars of rosy twilight from the west fell on the snowy plain. The hazel-wood, as they walked towards it, deepened in colour from brown to violet, and the crows were on the ground again, sitting in

black clumps amidst the scanty undergrowth, their beaks uplifted to the sky. Now and then there sounded from the road the sharp, sudden jingle of a bell, when the waiting horses stamped a hoof or moved a head.

Leo's heart beat. He felt that in the next few minutes their fate must be decided.

"Listen, Felicitas," he began; "things are in a bad way with us."

"What has happened?" she stammered, standing still, full of dismay, in the sleigh ruts.

"Nothing has happened yet. But we must part before something does."

She began to lament. "I knew you would desert me—I felt sure of it. But I won't let you. I will stay with you. I can't live without you." And she clung passionately to his arm, as if she feared he might, that minute, be snatched from her.

As he saw her face blanch, and her eyes raised to his in beseeching fear, he abandoned all thoughts of flight. He felt that responsibility for this trembling fellow-sinner was yet another burden added to his already sorely weighted soul.

She buried both hands in his fur, and held him fast as if she would never let him go. Had he walked on, he would have had to drag her after him along the ground.

"Then all I can do is to put a bullet through my brain," he murmured, looking beyond her.

She gave a sharp cry. "Have mercy on me," she implored. "Don't frighten me so. What have I done that you should frighten me so?"

"You have done nothing, Felicitas," he answered. "But Johanna is going to speak."

There was silence. The gentle breeze stole over the snow plains and whispered in the hedgerows. The crows had changed their squatting attitude, and were circling above the pair, with lazily flapping wings, while the more distant ones were preparing to fly.

Felicitas slowly loosened her grasp, and passed her hand three times dreamily over her forehead. She glanced searchingly to right and left, as though she suspected the avenger might be crouching in the ditch.

"Come into the wood," she said; "no one will see us there." And without waiting for his consent she plunged sideways over the deep snow, furrowed here and there by the footprints of wild creatures. She did not dare to stop, till she had reached the protection of the thin branches of the underwood. He followed her with deliberate steps, and he, too, felt relieved when the shrubs hid them from view.

"She *shall* not speak," exclaimed Felicitas, clasping her hands. "I pray you, dearest, to prevent it. You must put a seal on her lips; promise that you will."

He laughed gloomily. "There is one means by which I might prevent her," he said; "and if she insists, I could resort to it."

But again he felt disgust at the idea which he had before entertained for a moment, and then rejected as monstrous.

"Leave me alone!" he cried out to her. "I am sick and tired of it all . . . I must end it."

"Only, don't run away," she whimpered, clinging to him once more. "Don't run away—anything rather than that."

"I agree with you," he replied; "there is one other course for me to take—better than flight." He shuddered, and was silent.

"You mean die?" she asked, half inquisitive, half terrified, pressing herself against him, like a child in the dark.

He nodded. "You must see there is no third course."

"Yes, I see. Then die," she whispered, throwing back her head with an inviting smile. "Much better die."

He grew hot. "You seem to be in a tremendous hurry to get rid of me," he said with half fretful jocularity.

"To get rid of you?" she asked, offended. "Do you think I would let you die without me?"

"Felicitas!" he exclaimed, seizing both her hands.

"Could there be a more blissful fate for me, beloved," she went on in a whisper, "than to die in your arms?"

He held her close to him. A feeling of intoxication, which he interpreted as a longing for death, took shuddering possession of his soul. It was succeeded by a damping mistrust—mistrust of himself, and much more of her.

"Are you serious?" he asked. "For I tell you plainly this time it will be no joke—we shall not drink toothache drops!"

"How can you?" she pouted; and then, with a smile of rapture, she added, "I will be yours . . . yours. If not in life, at least in death!"

"Reflect on it well, Felicitas," he warned her again. "Remember, that it is not only the bald fact that we die. It may cost us no great pain to leave this scurvy world. But we shall forfeit in doing it all that man holds precious. We shall be cast like a dog into a nameless grave. They will spit at our memory."

"What will that matter to us?" she asked, smiling. "We shall know nothing about it."

"Then you wish to die?"

"Yes, in your arms I wish to die," she breathed, and laid her head back with eyes blissfully closed, so that the evening light illuminated the fairness of her face.

"That's how she will look," thought he.

She lifted her lids. "Yes, yes; but I am still alive," she said, guessing his thoughts. Then with half playful melancholy, she sought his mouth thirstingly with her lips, and they proceeded to discuss how things should be arranged.

The next day was to be consecrated to their last business affairs. At the hour of midnight they were to meet on the river's bank to select the place where the light of another day should dawn on them, united in death.

Felicitas shivered.

"You are already drawing back?" he asked, seized by fierce suspicion.

She hid her head on his breast. "And before?" she whispered up to him.

His glance wandered into the distance. He seemed to see the blue-hanging lamp at Fichtkampen, in whose rays he had lost for ever his pureness of heart, shining at him alluringly again.

"What do you mean by 'before'?" he stammered.

"I am a weak woman. At the very last moment I might lose my nerve and not be able to go down to the water alone, knowing that death would be waiting for me there. So please make it easier by coming up to fetch me. Then we could start together on our last walk."

For a moment a wild hope leapt up within him only to be quickly smothered. He looked down on her silently, and breathed in the fragrance of her body, that white, delicately moulded body, in which his young senses had once found rest and riches.

"If you are afraid," he said, "I will come."

She caught at the promise, and eagerly and anxiously began to explain how his visit was to be managed. Minna should go down to the stream and wait for him by the sandbank, and when he came, unlock the park gate and lead him up to her room by the new turret staircase.

He listened to her instructions half in a dream. He was shaken body and soul more strongly than before by that mysterious sense of intoxication, which was nothing, could be nothing else but the omnipotent desire for death.

And then they separated. She took the path to Uhlenfelde, and he went back to the sleigh.

When he reached the road, he stopped, leaned against a poplar, and looked after her. Her figure was a mere black strip in the midst of the vast white duskiness of the snow fields. It grew smaller and rounder, and finally shrank to a vanishing point. All at once a wave of cruel devouring scorn swept over him. Scorn of himself, scorn of her, scorn of the whole world.

This was the end! This was the end!

He laughed aloud, so fierce and mirthless a laugh, that Johann, who was sitting on his box twenty paces away, started and looked round.

The horses moved forward, the bells rippled through the air.

"What now?" Leo asked himself, and stared absently in the old coachman's face. He had intended to drive to Münsterberg. What did he want in Münsterberg? Ah, to be sure, he had been going to see the old Jew Jacobi in order to raise cash for his voyage to America. But that would not be necessary now. Nevertheless he must kill time somehow till the fatal hour drew near.

To Münsterberg, then. Sleighing was good sport, he said to himself, as he flew through the twilight, and the wind met his face. He tried to recollect what other business he had in Münsterberg. The threshing-machine wanted repairing. Hang the threshing-machine. Then there were debts to pay; paltry little debts; the big ones would have to remain unsettled. He owed a clerk called Danziger fifteen marks. A betting loss. Fritz, the head waiter at the Prussian Crown, had not been paid for the last drinking bout. And then he remembered that the fair-haired Ida had drunk his health in three brandy bitters, and was so far the loser by the transaction.

"Fair Ida isn't a bad sort," he thought. "She mustn't suffer through my death."

On the road, to the right, he passed the tumble-down seat of the Neuhaus family, who rack-rented their tenants to stave off bankruptcy. A little further on was Althof, where fat Hans Sembritzky was gradually developing into the worst of husbands through having too easy a time.

All was vain and rotten. Life was a hollow mockery, and he whistled contemptuously as he adopted the embittered attitude of the abandoned outcast towards the world he was leaving. Aye, to quit it was the only wisdom. For everything else was folly, even Ulrich's . . . Hush! he must not think of Ulrich.

The blow would kill him, that was certain. Not the strongest could survive such a betrayal. All he could do to soften it would be to leave behind a few hasty lines, alluding to the old sin, but not to the renewal of the old love. Ah, why had Ulrich committed the insane folly of marrying a woman who belonged by nature to a scamp like himself? No, he must not, could not think of Ulrich.

How charming she had looked in her mourning weeds. Like a nun in a novel. With what tactful care she had avoided mentioning Ulrich's name, as if no such person as Ulrich existed. And it had not occurred to her either to waste a word or a tear on the poor little fellow in his distant grave.

He was dead, and forgotten before the grass had grown over

him. Dead and forgotten as he, Leo Sellenthin, would soon be dead and forgotten. Well, the only thing that mattered now was that fair-haired Ida should be paid for the absinth.

First he went to pay his debts at the Prussian Crown, and found two or three of his recent associates there, fat Hans, of course, among them. They were busily engaged playing games of dice of their own invention over their glasses of flat beer. They played "The Naked Sparrow," and "The Highest House-number" at six-pfenning points.

Leo was greeted with a roar of welcome, and asked to join. He answered with sudden reckless indiscretion: "My boys, I am going to shoot myself to-morrow, so I don't know whether I ought."

They considered the question seriously, then the majority agreed that it would be permissible for him to play if the games chosen bore on the gravity of the situation. So they forthwith proposed, "The Wet Funeral," "The Corpse in the Forest," and because they could not think of anything else particularly sad, "The Hole in the Ceiling."

Leo made his throws, and cracked his jokes, but all the time a voice cried triumphantly in his ear, "Die, old boy, die—die."

When he had lost the game and paid up, he explained that he had business to settle with the fair Ida, and as it was dark, the others offered to accompany him. Leo took the lead. He pushed open the swing-door of Engelmann's beer-cellar, and found in the hot little room, reeking with smoke, a table full of toping bailiffs and farmers.

Fair Ida flew to him and hung round his neck; but he shook her off roughly, for there at the head of the drinkers he beheld the Candidate Kurt Brenckenberg smug and smiling as ever, and a cruel satisfaction thrilled through him.

"The fellow is now in my clutches," he said to himself; "and so I shall not go to another world without having avenged the insult my family has suffered from this impudent cur."

The Halewitz bailiffs, at the entrance of the new-comers, had risen respectfully to give up their seats, but the candidate, though visibly paler, pretended not to have noticed or seen any one come in. Leo went up to him.

"I have something to say to you, Herr Kurt Brenckenberg."

"You know where to find me, Herr Leo von Sellenthin," replied the Candidate, without stirring from his place.

"Thank God I have found you," Leo replied.

The boy struggled to put on his most arrogant air.

"Excuse me, Herr von Sellenthin," he said, toying nervously with the badge in his buttonhole. "I must remind you that I am corps-student, and know what is etiquette in these matters. Once

before you have treated me in this extraordinary fashion. Please leave me alone. I have no time to give you at present."

Something like pity awoke in Leo, as he smiled down on this wretched little upstart bristling with pugnacity. At another time he might have challenged him to face his pistol, and might have shot him down, but now that his own death-knell had sounded, such a course seemed hardly worth while and to belong too much to the things that did not matter; to the petty despicable affairs of the world on which his hold was loosening.

Nevertheless he determined to give the young man a lesson, so that his foolish little sister should be safe from his impertinent attentions for the future.

"Get up!" he roared, seizing him by the arm, and putting him on his feet.

The Candidate raised his fist to strike him in the face. But before he could carry out his intention Leo's left hand gripped both his wrists as in a vice.

The fair-haired Ida screamed loudly and ran out. The bailiffs drew aside perturbed, and Hans Sembritzky initiated the rest of his party in the cause of the quarrel.

For a few minutes dead silence reigned in the stuffy, crowded room, which was insufficiently lighted by one smoking lamp.

The Candidate in his frantic efforts to free his hands bounded up and down like a dancing doll.

"You young blackguard," said Leo; "instead of sitting on your form at school you swagger about the countryside and play the devil. If your old father won't spank you I must."

He looked round for an instrument that would serve his purpose, and saw hanging against the wall a stout ruler, which the landlord used when making up his accounts. He tore it from its nail, then, supporting himself in a half-sitting posture against the nearest chair, he stretched the youth full length across his left knee. And while with his right he controlled the Candidate's desperately kicking feet, he did execution on his tightened trousers with a vigour that would have astounded the "Normans" and "Westphalians" had they been spectators of the scene.

"There, my son," said Leo, when he had done; "now you have got what you deserved. Go home and give your father my compliments."

With a face white as chalk and starting eyes, the Candidate reeled to a seat.

Leo calmly hung up the ruler again on its nail, and made a deep bow to the onlookers who stood round in a breathless and amazed circle. Then, giving Hans Sembritzky his hand, he strode to the door, laughing heartily. Not till he was seated in the sleigh did he remember that he had not paid fair Ida for her three absinths.

XXXVII

SUPPER was going on when Leo reached Halewitz. He entered the house unobserved. The corridor was in darkness, but Christian, who had just gone to the kitchen with a pile of plates, had left the dining-room door ajar, and a thin stream of light that came through it penetrated the shadows. But no laughter, no cheerful talk fell on his ear. Meals at Halewitz were now sad affairs.

"Shall I go in and sit down with them?" he asked himself. Then he felt that he could not trust himself, that his farewell emotions might be too much for him. He would take a last peep at them, and then go quietly to his rooms.

On tiptoe he drew nearer. There the three sat at table under the golden radiance of the hanging lamp; grandmamma on the left. Ah! God, how she had aged, he thought, and his heart smote him. Beside her Elly was looking fresh and innocent, with the lamplight illumining her fair hair, and on the right sat Hertha. She was the same, but different. The dignified repose of her bearing, the troubled glance of her eye, the lines of pain on the brown oval cheeks, the firmly closed lips, were all new to him.

He felt that she had ripened and developed under the same sorrow which had rotted and withered him. How blind he had been to her fine qualities. Only the nearness of death opened his eyes to them, and to everything that surrounded him.

He saw every detail of the rooms that he had so long avoided, as if he had been given an extra sense with which to impress things on his mind before leaving life. His ear listened eagerly for each word that fell from the dear ones' lips. His hand caressed with unconscious affection the door-posts, with their time-worn oak carvings.

Christian's coming back ended his reverie, and before he had been seen he retired softly to his room.

He wanted to work, to go through the books, and put things straight so far as it was possible. He did not wish to sneak out of the world like a beggarly bankrupt. He lit his lamp and began to cast up figures.

The year had not been a bad one. Old arrears had been patched

up; hopeful prospects peeped out everywhere between the columns. Amazing success had attended the beetroot culture, and in following years the ground would be even more richly productive in that line. He was on the point of drawing up a new scheme of planting when he remembered that the day after to-morrow he would not be alive.

He shut the book with a bang and jumped up. How farcical it all was; how insane both life and death, so far as he was concerned! He rang the bell violently, for he was hungry. Since the morning he had scarcely touched food.

Christian appeared on the threshold, and reeled back in delighted astonishment at beholding his master in the house at this unaccustomed hour.

"Now then, old friend," said Leo, filled with a strange tenderness; "won't those old pins of yours carry you any longer?"

And as Christian in his confusion stammered forth inarticulate sentences, Leo put a ten-mark piece into his hand.

"You have had to keep bad hours lately on my account. But in future, old man, you shall have your proper rest."

Christian wept tears of joy over his master's unlooked-for consideration, and shuffled away to superintend his supper.

The news he took to the kitchen soon ascended to the parlour, and the stir it caused in the house smacked somewhat of the prodigal's return. Doors were cautiously opened and shut, whispered conversations were held in the corridors, and now and then hesitating, hushed footsteps halted outside his room.

All this he heard and ground his teeth.

"Die, die, old boy!" cried a voice in his ears. "Die—die!"

Christian brought a tray groaning with good things, in the selection of which he could see that his mother had had a hand. He fell to, greedily. There was the favourite dish of his schoolboy days, of fried potatoes with jugged hare and baked slices of ham.

"Dear old girl," he thought; "this is her way of saying 'Stay with us.'" He laughed, but tears came into his eyes.

Christian wanted to know what he would have to drink.

"Don't ask me, old chap," he said, "but bring the very best that my deceased father left behind. Bring three bottles."

Astonished, Christian begged for the key of the cellar, for its treasures were now kept zealously locked up. The wine came, the wine that had been his father's pride and joy. Why should he leave the glorious stuff to be drunk by strangers? And in long draughts he emptied the first bottle.

But for him the wine had no flavour. He felt his cheeks grow hot, and his mood become more sombre. He would have liked to make his exit from the world with gay nonchalance, but instead the old agony began to gnaw at his vitals again, like an ulcer that was

incurable. He started pacing wildly up and down the room, and wrenched open the windows one after the other.

He longed for a companion. He was in sore need of the sound of a human voice, the touch of a human hand. And this desire, which he supposed would be his last on earth, was strangely enough fulfilled.

It was nearly ten o'clock when the front door bell clanged violently through the house. Leo's hand went out involuntarily towards the wall where his weapons hung. "They have come to fetch me," he thought, with a sudden, horrid fear of arrest. He drew himself to his full height and awaited his visitor.

Christian announced that Pastor Brenckenberg had called and urgently requested an interview.

"Hurrah!" cried Leo; "the very person I want. Let him come in."

All the grim resentment he had so long cherished in the bottom of his heart for this old man rose to the surface. He felt that he had been delivered into his hand at an auspicious moment. In this hour he would make him rue it. In his company he would celebrate his farewell to life. In a voice of thunder he welcomed the belated guest, who, kicking the snow off his boots with his heels, entered the room in breathless haste. He was attired in a shabby fur coat like an Esquimaux's, and had twisted a thick brown woollen scarf two or three times round his throat. His fleshy face was purple either from the winter winds or from excitement. Sweat ran down his hanging cheeks, and in his fierce bulldog eyes, which in vain endeavoured to look round him with serenity, there was an expression of eager impatience.

"Well, old fellow!" Leo exclaimed. "The Almighty has done well to lead you here to-night. See, this is something extra special. A farewell drink." And turning to Christian, he gave him orders to bring in another armful of bottles and ice with them.

The pastor had remained standing at the door, tugging violently at the woollen scarf which in the heat of the room nearly suffocated him.

"Take it off, take it off, old man," said Leo.

He did as he was commanded, stroked back the oiled strands of hair on his neck, and, with his mouth open, breathed heavily like an animal wanting to sneeze.

"I am glad to see you so well satisfied with yourself, my son," he said at last. "Just as if you had performed some heroic action."

"Of course," Leo answered; "to me heroic actions come naturally." And he poured him out a glass.

"Your health, old man."

The pastor stole a timid glance at the sparkling wine. "Do you

know why I have come here at this hour, when most people are in their beds?" he asked sourly, leaning against the door.

"To your health! Didn't you hear me?" cried Leo.

Whereat the pastor staggered towards the table, and raised the glass with two trembling hands. But he put it down again.

"I can't," he groaned, and protruded his lower jaw, half sobbing with disgust.

"What?" shouted Leo. "You despise my best wine? What fad is this?"

"Nothing, nothing," muttered the old clergyman, and pushed the glass nervously away from him to the other side of the table. "In my present condition, I should outrage my body and outrage the wine if I drank it."

"Condition!" jeered Leo. "And what sort of condition do you suppose that I am in? Have you ever seen a wild boar run to earth in a swamp, quenching its thirst with foul water, when the hounds have almost begun to tear it to pieces? Well, that is the condition in which I am drinking here. But I am going to drink another for all that. To your health, old man!"

The pastor regarded him with a disconcerted expression, then silently raised the glass, emptied it, and gave himself a shake.

"Isn't it nice?" laughed Leo. "You and I sitting and drinking here amiably together, cheek by jowl. We ought to be happy and sing that good old song, 'Sublime and sacred, brothers, is the hour which unites us here again,'" and he sang the couplet. "Or perhaps you would prefer some more obscene chorus? I am ready for any dare-devilry."

He tossed down two more glasses of the iced wine, feeling as he did so how his imagination began to go mad. All sorts of pictures shot up before his eyes, and disappeared again directly he tried to retain them.

The old man, who had been brooding gloomily with his chin on his breast and a fixed glare in his eyes, raised himself slowly with his hands grasping the edge of the table, and struggled with the unpronounced words which half strangled him.

"Do you know why I have come?" he asked a second time.

"I think that I may safely hazard a guess," laughed Leo. "It was my unpleasant duty, this evening, to give your young hopeful a drubbing which he won't forget in a hurry. Come, here's to his health. Long may your son and heir flourish!"

"Look here, Fritzchen," said the pastor, "this is mocking and jeering at a poor parent whom anxiety has driven out into the night. I call it low of you, Fritzchen. I couldn't have believed you capable of it, knowing what your character used to be. But I'll describe to you the state of things at home, and then, perhaps, you will be

stirred to a little human pity. We were sitting at supper, my wife and the children and I, when the boy rushed in, as white as a sheet and his lips running with blood. He fell on the ground and clutched at my knees. 'For God's sake, tell me what has happened, my son!' said I. And he cried out, 'Father, father, kill me! Kill me—I am disgraced, dishonoured; all decent men will kick and spurn me like a mangy cur in future.' Then I dragged him into my study and said, 'Tell me all, lad.' And so I learnt what had passed. Fritzchen, why have you disgraced my own flesh and blood? How have I sinned against you that you should have done this thing?"

"You have sinned against me enough, old man," replied Leo; "but of that, more hereafter. As for your precious son, he has behaved himself like a cad to my sister, and insulted my family and me; so I was forced to punish him. Punishment is just, you know—that is your own principle."

"Why didn't you challenge him," asked the pastor, "according to the custom of our country?"

Leo laughed at him derisively. "Challenge! As if I had the time to waste bullets on every silly youth living on his father's bounty. Whoever doesn't earn his bread doesn't deserve that a man should take the trouble to load a pistol on his account. A cane serves the purpose best, or a ruler, if it comes handy."

The pastor nodded his head in dumb distress, and Leo continued to fix a hard, revengeful gaze upon him.

"Now then, cheer up, cheer up," he bantered. "You haven't come here to sit with a dry whistle and your mouth shut."

"Fritzchen," began the old man again, "you may be right in everything, and I'll admit that the boy is a rascal; but he is the best I have got at present. My second boy won't be a man for another ten years. And you, whom I have always loved, must needs come and ruin him for life. Fritzchen! it won't do—it won't do."

"Nonsense!" pished Leo.

"No, Fritzchen. He has generally been able to pull himself together again after a scrape, but now he is completely done for. He must slink about for the rest of his days like a criminal, and when he appears amongst his equals they will give him the cold shoulder because of the stain that rests on him. You see, Fritzchen, that I am an old corps-student myself, and know what it means to be thrashed without the chance of defending yourself. If it had been a burglar or an escaped lunatic who had done it, he might get over it. But you are the Baron von Sellenthin, whom all the world knows, and if you decline to give satisfaction, the world will conclude that you have very good reasons for doing so, and be on your side."

Leo groaned, and thought of the shame that he was about to bring the next night on his own good name and memory.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked; "am I to go and humbly beg his pardon, and promise not to do it again?"

"No, Fritzchen; but when he sends a second bearing his challenge to you, to-morrow, you ought to accept it and arrange the usual formalities."

"And then?"

"The rest, Fritzchen, will be your affair."

"Look out!" cried Leo, in a threatening tone. "You know I never jest. My bullet never misses the mark at which I choose to aim. I have sent one man into eternity already—remember that."

Then the pastor slowly rose to his feet, and with a solemn movement of his arms, he said—

"I am an old man, and I have not got much to look forward to. He is my first-born, my heart's delight, my hope. But I would a thousand times rather hand him over to you to do with him what you did with that other, than that he should continue to live despised and disgraced."

Leo was shocked for a moment, but the next he felt a wild satisfaction that buoyed him up. Here was an old man coming to him—a murderer and would-be suicide—to beg him take his son's life. And he asked the favour over two foaming glasses of wine. Truly they were a well-assorted couple. The devil himself could not have matched them better.

"Your health, old 'un!" he would have shouted again, but the words stuck in his throat.

And the old man, who could scarcely stand on his legs, dragged his corpulent body ponderously round the table, and laid both hands on Leo's shoulders. Speaking down into his ear from over the back of his chair, he said—

"Think, my son, for how many years your training was in my hands. I taught you to fight for honour and right till the last drop of blood. You were a wild lad, and tyranny would have been dearer to you than justice. But my rod hung over you, and you were obliged to obey, however much you kicked against the pricks. And for that I claim your gratitude to-day."

"You have my thanks," sneered Leo. "And if you want a testimonial here it is—you were a severe taskmaster."

"No, Fritzchen; that I was not. For I was fond of you, and you were fond of me. Don't you remember that September evening when we went out into the meadows and climbed on to a hay-stack, and lay looking up at the clouds? Nothing happened, but all of a sudden you crept close to me and, laying your head quietly against my arm, began to sob. I think that you must remember it, for on that evening I became your friend. Then there was the day we went into the town to see 'William Tell.' In the night you came

to me, and, sitting on the edge of the bed, took your solemn oath that you, too, would die for your Fatherland, for liberty."

"Oh, my God!" groaned Leo, and buried his head in his hands.

"You see, Fritzchen," went on the old man, "I may have been at that time a good-for-nothing, and as fond of a glass as I am to-day; but your young soul I guided aright, you must allow. And have you forgotten how I encouraged your friendship with Ulrich? How my only wish was to play third in the covenant when Johanna could not officiate? And then again, my son, there was the time when your heart first beat in response to another. Have you forgotten that too? The eldest daughter of the forester at Knutzendorf, who used to bring the weekly paper every Saturday to the castle? She was eleven and you were thirteen. I believe she didn't know that two and two make four. But she grew into a devilish clever girl later; but never mind that. Do you remember confiding in me the secret that you had run after her in the road and kissed her, and that she had let herself be kissed quite calmly, and it made you so happy, Fritzchen, so confoundedly happy?"

With an exclamation of anguish Leo raised his elbows and shook off the old man's heavy touch.

That had been the beginning of it; his introduction to love, and now it had come to an end.

He sprang to his feet.

"What do you want with me, man," he cried, "that you torture me thus?"

The pastor bowed his massive head almost humbly.

"I only want to remind you that you owe me a debt of gratitude," he said, "and I wish you to make it good to my son. Here I stand —may God pardon me—here I stand and entreat you to fight with him, and if you can't help yourself, shoot him dead."

There was a silence.

The old clock in the corner chimed half-past eleven.

"This time to-morrow," thought Leo, "I shall be walking to my death." And with this reflection he thrust from him the old memories which had begun to weave a coil of softening sentiment about his soul. He would have liked to pour out the whole gamut of emotions surging within him, in curses on the head of this old man who had come to fight a desperate battle on behalf of his despicable little son's honour.

He placed himself in front of him with his legs apart and his hands in his pockets and laughed.

"Look at me," he shouted.

"I *am* looking at you," replied the pastor.

"How jolly mild you are to-day, old fellow. You bleat like a

lamb instead of roaring like a lion. Now tell me, what do you see in my face?"

"Mockery and scorn," was the answer; "scorn of me and the Lord above us. That is all I see."

"Well, then, you don't see half. If you had the faintest conception of who it is stands before you here, you would hurry off as fast as your fat legs would permit. You come and talk to me about affairs of honour—to me, and I am little more already than a living corpse! You want me to singe a hole in your son's body, so that in a fortnight's time he'll be all right again, and able to swagger with renewed cocksureness—for that is what you are driving at with all these sugary entreaties; but no, my old friend, I am not to be got over with any such artifice—murder is in my heart. A cloud of blood hangs before my eyes. You, too, seem to be swimming in it, and the lamp and everything is red and dull from undiluted blood. Now you know what I am. And I will tell you what more I am going to be. A perjurer, a cowardly hound, sneaking out of the world in his thwarted lust and desperation. I have desecrated the hearth of my dearest friend with my unlawful passions, and I am going now to sprinkle it with blood rather than play the basest part of all towards him. Yes, I shall heap scandal on scandal, so that you will be ashamed, old man, that you ever knew me. And the fine wines that you have drunk under my roof will taste as bitter as gall in your remembrance. So tipple some more of it. Here goes! Your health; to your health, old priest!"

And he drank, drank the whole bottle empty, and dashed it into a corner.

The pastor stood like a man turned to stone. He tried to speak, but speech forsook him.

"You think me a fool, I dare say, to blurt out all this," Leo continued, "but I'll tell you why I do it. Simply because I can't resist the tempting opportunity of holding a reckoning with you. For who is to blame for the whole business? Why you—you, first of all, and then Johanna. Between you, you have hounded me into this slough, where I must sink. You began it. In the autumn I spoke my mind to you, but then I was an angel of God compared with what I am to-day, and did not foresee the end. Repent—I was to repent, repent, repent! Didn't I raise my hands in self-defence and implore you to leave me alone, leave me to live my life in my own way! But you had no mercy, neither you, nor Johanna, nor *she* who now is driven to the same extremity as I am. Women in this world delight to send us to the devil. But now it is your turn, my friend. You had no mercy on me then, so now I will show you none. Let your charming boy heal his injured skin as best he can, let him lay dock leaves on the wounds or ammonia, which he likes; and let

him heal his outraged honour with texts from the Bible. As for you, see that you clear out of here as soon as possible. I have done with you, and you with me. Christian!" He opened the door. "Christian, help the Herr Pastor on with his coat. Good night." So saying, he threw himself full length on the sofa and drummed on the leather with his heels, taking no further notice of the pastor's proceedings.

The latter staggered out, hardly knowing what he did.

The cold night air brought him to his senses. He paused under the courtyard gateway and considered. Then, instead of taking the road home to Wengern, he skirted the park palings in the deep snow and went to the dower-house. There he thundered with the knocker till he brought a maid-servant, half asleep, to the door, and asked to speak to old Frau Gräfin instantly.

The next morning at eight o'clock a telegram was despatched from the post-office at Münsterberg by Pastor Brenckenberg.

"*To Baron Kletzingk, Königsberg,*
"*Hotel Deutches Haus.*

"*Come home at once. Your house is in danger.*

"*Johanna.*"

XXXVIII

FELICITAS returned from her last interview with Leo, glowing and intoxicated with the idea of death. What a harmonious ending it would be to die in the arms of her lover, breathing her last breath on his lips.

She recalled a picture that she had once seen in Königsberg, afterwards famous all over the continent. It was called "Tired of Life," and represented a man and a woman who had bound themselves together with ropes, and were about to hurl themselves from some steps in the foreground into the sea. She had felt an envious tremour then, and now all at once the old foolish dream was to be fulfilled at Leo's side.

She had nothing to bind her to life; in every way it would be best to quit it. Ulrich became more and more of an invalid, and less and less disposed to make things bearable for her. The society of the neighbourhood afforded her no consolation; the women hated her, the men persecuted her with their love; and one was as unsatisfying and dull as the other. The future promised her nothing. She saw herself slowly fading away, bored to extinction by discussion about the crops and new scientific theories of drainage, of farm and dairy management. To die now would be a thousand times preferable.

"If only I had my little Paul," she thought, "there would at least be something to live for," and the momentary re-awakening of the maternal instinct within her filled her eyes with hot tears.

But in the midst of her tender compassion for herself and her dead child, the thought seized her like an icy hand, that in a few days, she, like him, would be lying in the dark damp earth.

Was it possible? could it be?

In a year—or better still in ten years' time, after this love had burned itself out, it would be all very well. But now, when a new ready-made happiness lay before them, and would have to be left untasted, unenjoyed? Would it not be folly?

Once more she thought of the picture "Tired of Life," and derived a little solace from it.

The man had not been in the least like Leo. As far as she could remember, he had worn a velvet coat like an artist, or something of the kind. Oh yes, artists, with their wide views and great minds, were the men who understood the hearts of women, and how to drag them into eternity. She wasn't sure about the velvet coat after all. But the woman's white satin dress she remembered distinctly; it had fitted like gleaming armour over the bust. That wasn't the fashion now, but what did fashions matter when one was going to die? The only thing that mattered was to look beautiful in death. And she began to consider what she should put on. Among her peignoirs and *sautes de lit*, she possessed one of softest *crêpe de chine* which fell in straight Greek folds, and was drawn in above the waist by a golden girdle. She had ordered it from Paris before her second marriage, and had been keeping it for some special occasion. This occasion would certainly have arrived now if Leo had not got hold of the stupid idea that they must creep out into the night-mists to put an end to themselves.

In any case, she would not forego the pleasure of trying on the artistic garment. She locked the doors, put shades of pink gauze on the toilette-table candles, and undressed. As she stood before the glass, her figure in the graceful Greek draperies illumined seductively by the subdued purple light, she was ravished by the sight of her own beauty.

He must see her like this. Just for one second, and all thought of dying would be abandoned. How glad she was that she had extracted that promise from him at the last, to come and fetch her. When she met him thus attired, what else could he do but snatch her in his arms, and instead of dying with her in the gruesome manner that he had proposed, he would tread again at her side the primrose path of passion, which Rhaden's jealousy had so hatefully interrupted.

Yes, so she would win him back to her altogether, her big, adoring boy.

But the night that she passed before this contemplated enjoyment was anything but peaceful. She recalled his face when he had said, "This time it will be no joke. We shall not drink toothache drops." And even granted that she could bring him to reason, there was always the vision of Johanna hovering in the background, eager to shatter their new-found bliss.

Was there no way out of it? She pondered and pondered till her head ached, staring into the darkness with wide, anxious eyes. The plan that she hit on at last did not differ eventually by a hair's breadth from the one which Leo had rejected as unworthy. She would write to Ulrich to-morrow and impress on him how Johanna's brain was becoming more unhinged every day. She would give

striking examples of it, pity and defend the unfortunate creature, hint at a pending catastrophe, and so prepare his mind for having to deal with the delusions of a mad woman, if she should really make a betrayal of her secret.

That would do beautifully; and content at last, she quietly fell asleep.

The whole of the next day she was in a more or less happy mood. A kind of bridal excitement quickened the blood in her veins. It was true that every now and then a sickening memory of Leo's death-threats overcame her. But she was too confident of the victorious power of her beauty, which of old had held his senses captive, to entertain any serious fears.

She leaned back dreamily in a chair by the window and stared across the stream in the direction of Halewitz, counting the hours. Old Minna, who the day before had been told of Leo's coming midnight visit, and had received her instructions, ventured, as she hobbled through the room, to assist her mistress in this employment. "Now it is only eight hours, gracious little lady," and then, "Only seven and a half now." And so the time grew shorter.

At dusk a powdering of snow began to fall, renewing the purity of the far-stretching grey plains, and quickly obliterating the roads. Laughing blissfully, she began to beat with her fingers on the window-panes and to sing a song of the knight who came through floods and tempests, and by dangerous paths to greet his lady love.

Then she thought of her dead boy, and shed a few tears. "Ah, my little son," she murmured, clasping her hands, "you may be glad that you have found eternal peace so early."

And this made her joyous again, and so she passed a highly agreeable afternoon giving herself up to pleasant dreams, and she was no further troubled by suspense.

At five o'clock the lamps were brought in, and towards eight supper was served. Half an hour later a housemaid rushed in greatly excited, and announced that the gnädiger Herr had driven into the courtyard.

"Which gnädiger Herr?" Felicitas asked.

So calm and self-possessed was her mood that she didn't in the least grasp what had happened. The maid repeated her information, and her first emotion was one of resentment at her husband's coming home. She would have liked to beg him to turn round and go away again.

Only gradually did she become alive to the danger which hung over her. Half-stunned, she remained sitting at the supper table, and rolled up her serviette.

"Johanna has played me this trick," she thought, for she hated

her old friend so intensely that she attributed to her any evil that befell her, as a matter of course.

But the next moment she was convinced of the groundlessness of her suspicion. In was quite impossible that Johanna could know anything of what she had planned for to-day. Her meeting with Ulrich seemed to confirm this. Although for a moment the first searching look that he fixed on her was full of uneasiness, he soon became reassured at finding her sitting over the remains of her supper in solitude.

The alarming telegram had so far had effect that it had brought him back to Uhlenfelde unannounced post haste in a hired sleigh, but if he did not, in answer to Lizzie's questions, give the reason of his sudden return, it was simply to spare his wife unnecessary anxiety rather than because he mistrusted her.

He knew Johanna of old. She had always looked on the blackest side of things, and her well-meant warning might concern some question of estate management.

He resolved to drive over to Halewitz early the next morning, and to be content to-day only to subject house, yard, and staff to a more stringent examination than was usual on the day of his coming home.

He felt limp and low-spirited, and his wife's persistent chatter pained him. As soon as he could, he rose from the table to start on his round with the bailiffs.

Scarcely had he vanished through the door, than old Minna ran in, wringing her hands.

"Ah, gracious little mistress, gracious one," she whispered, "we must send word to Halewitz at once, otherwise something dreadful may happen."

Felicitas reflected.

If Leo heard of Ulrich's return, it was not improbable that he might change his tactics, and, to avoid a meeting with him, go back to his original intention of flight. Then she would be left behind to mourn for him to the end of her days. On the other hand, if he were allowed to come and all due precaution taken, there would not be a shadow of risk. At Fichtkampen Minna had often brought him to her in ten times more difficult circumstances.

And, besides, when she considered the matter more closely, she saw an unspeakable advantage in Ulrich's presence. Should dear old Leo refuse to be weaned altogether from his suicidal resolve, she would only have to tell him who had come home that day and was sleeping in the room through the dressing-room, to bring him to a tractable and peaceable frame of mind.

This decided her.

"Stay where you are, Minna," she said. "You know all the

secrets of the house, and if you manage to smuggle him in all right I will give you another silk dress."

Towards ten o'clock Ulrich came back from his walk. He reported himself dead tired, and said that he would retire to his room.

"And mind you go to bed at once," Felicitas said.

He nodded assent, and kissed her on forehead and hand, according to his habit when saying good night.

"How hot your cheeks are," he remarked.

"I am so glad that you are here," she answered, and she did not lie.

"This time it will be no joke. We shall not drink toothache drops."

Again those words of Leo's occurred to her unpleasantly. She lighted her husband upstairs, closed the shutters in his room, and looked at the thermometer to see that he was neither too warm nor too cold for the night. Then, saying good night once more, she left him and went down again to give Minna some last hints.

When she entered her bedroom half an hour later she heard Ulrich still pacing up and down. That was fatal. She dared not put on the *crêpe de chine* peignoir yet, lest he should surprise her in it, for though their present relations were such that he would not come to her for conjugal reasons, he might, hearing her move, at any moment open the door and ask some question. So she contented herself with arranging her hair *à la grecque*, and giving her face a soft film of powder. The peignoir lay spread out ready in the dressing-room. The clock struck eleven. Still another hour!

What should she do to kill time? She sat down at the writing-table, and began to turn over old papers with a tremulous hand. A happy idea came into her head. She would begin a new existence from this hour, an existence full of glorious joy and imperishable youth, a masque of spring, a midsummer's night dream, a revel of sweetest, lightest laughter. For this end, all that had any connection with years of shame and tormenting anguish must be destroyed and burnt. Nothing should be left, nothing but him, whom, after what sacrifices God only knew, she had at last reconquered.

She tore letter after letter into little pieces. They contained declarations of love of every description, ranging from the sentimental balderdash of young Neuhaus to the cynical quips of old Stolt. As she read them she laughed.

"If he had not come home," she thought, "I should have had to give myself to one or the other."

Then her hand fell on her dead boy's little packet of letters. A

cold shiver ran through her. But she wouldn't be sad. She would not. He was happily at rest for ever, her dear Paulchen. Still, it was not easy to destroy his letters. Bnt it must be done, for it was more necessary than anything else. She kissed the poor little packet, then slowly tore the first sheet across, and the second. The clock chimed half-past eleven, and she started up and listened, breathing hard, into the darkness of the dressing-room. Ulrich's tired footsteps still echoed from the room beyond—up and down! Up and down!

The minutes flew, and there lay the Greek costume waiting to be donned. Might she, dare she, array herself in it now? With bent ear she listened and listened. It was too late to turn back.

Punctually at midnight Leo von Sellenthin entered the bedroom of Ulrich Kletzingk's wife, to take her with him to meet death, as they had agreed to meet it.

When she heard the door behind her creak on its hinges she sprang back from her post and softly drew the bolt. Only then had she the courage to look round.

Her first emotion as she beheld him standing at the door was one of intense chagrin that at this long-looked-for tryst she should appear before him as black as a crow. And this wound to her vanity put even the threat of death out of her head.

He wore a long riding-cloak, which completely hid his arms, and he was covered from head to foot with snow.

"Is it still snowing?" she asked, and wiped his moustache, from which icicles hung, with her black-bordered pocket-handkerchief. "My poor darling, how wet you are!"

He did not stir, or even take the fur cap from his head.

"You stand there like a post," she said. "Why don't you take off your things?"

And as he continued motionless, she unbuttoned his collar for him, and the heavy cloak slipped off his shoulders on to the floor. She fancied she heard something hard in its folds strike against the panelling of the wall.

"What was that?" she inquired, terrified.

"Nothing," he growled, and blew through his teeth in an attempt to laugh.

A cold shudder ran through her. "What a good thing Ulrich is there," she thought. Had she been alone with Leo in the house, she would have been horribly frightened.

Then she threw both arms round his neck and pillowed her head against his breast. Thus she stood for a few minutes, murmuring—

"Now I have got you all to myself. But you must be very quiet," she added quickly, in a warning tone, "for some one is sleeping not far off."

He nodded.

"And do you love me?"

She saw his face change, and felt how he trembled. She pressed her hands against her breast, breathing rapidly.

"I must do it now," she said to herself. It was no matter whether he was asleep over there or not.

She took a box of matches from the bedside table, and said, smiling—

"Wait a minute, dearest. I have something to attend to."

She disappeared, softly bolting the door as she went.

Leo still stood on the same spot. "Here I am, at my goal," he thought. Then he let his eyes wander round the room in dull curiosity. He looked at the lamp hanging from the ceiling, and noticed that the silken, befringed shade was rose-pink. At Fichtkampen it had been blue. The difference impressed itself on his mind, which seemed incapable of taking in anything else. He wished that she would come back so that he needn't stand there feeling so stupid and wretched. Then he remembered the smiling promises with which she had parted from him the other day. A pang of anxiety, mingled with a weak hope to which he could not give a name, overwhelmed him. It seemed to him as if she had the power of paralysing his limbs, and draining the marrow from his bones.

"What am I doing here?" he stammered, looking round with a wild glance. "Why have I come?"

Five, ten minutes passed, and she did not reappear. He stared at the door through which she had vanished. It was certain that she had another scheme on hand. Whatever it might be, she would find him pliable as putty. How tired he was! He dragged himself to the chair on which she had been sitting before he came in. He buried his head in his hands and brooded absently over the papers and letters which were strewn about the writing-table.

"My Dear Mamma,

"Nearly all the boys are going home for Christmas. Eric Froben will stay here, because he has no mamma, and Fritz Lawsky because he has only a guardian, and If., who comes from India, and is as yellow as a Gruyére cheese. All the other boys are going home. Why mayn't I come home? Some have a longer journey to their homes than I have. Oh, I do want to come home so badly. I cry every morning and every might, because I mayn't come home——"

He had read so far mechanically, hardly conscious that he was not reading the advertisement column of a newspaper, when suddenly he awoke to the reality. He took the sheet in both hands, and turned it over and over, while a sound like a faint whine came from his throat. With fixed, fierce eyes, he read on.

He read of the distribution of presents beneath the Christmas tree; of the bell which would be rung when the happy hour came; what If., the boy from India, was to get. He did not skip one of the childish wishes, from the lead soldiers to the pocket inkstand and the sweets. He half rejoiced that each item stabbed his breast like a sharp sword. He seemed to hear a child's voice crying out of the distance and the night, "Uncle Leo! Uncle Leo!"

He sprang to his feet. His mind was made up. Lifting his cloak from the floor, he threw it over his shoulder, and tapped and tested the double trigger of the weapon that was ready for coming events in the breast-pocket. And so he waited, armed and prepared.

Then, noiselessly, the door opened. A half-naked figure stood on the threshold with the rosy light of the lamp cast full upon it. The softly rounded arms were lifted longingly in an arch above her head, displaying her full breasts. The white drapery fell from her plump shoulders in straight, unbroken folds to her pink, bare feet. She stood there like the very goddess of love, although there was nothing divine truly about the small, round face, with its tip-tilted nose and sensuous lips.

He looked at her, and she seemed the incarnation of the sin to which he had been an easy victim from the first—the smiling, flattering sin that meant no harm yet stalked on its complacent way over all hindrances, even over the body of the dead. Wrath and disgust convulsed him. It was for this, then, that he had come, for this!

She, on her side, expected that he would rush at her with an exclamation of delight, and, as Ulrich was not yet asleep, she gave a warning "Hush!" Then she let the door fall back in the lock with experienced caution.

Still he did not move, and, misinterpreting his stupefaction, she determined to give him courage. She glided across the room, and, nestling against him, she whispered, half roguishly, half humbly—

"There! Now you have come into your property."

Her bare arms encircled his neck. But he pushed her away from him with swift decision.

"Listen, Felicitas," he said, fighting for breath, "I have just read a letter from your boy. After that I have no inclination to make love to you. Neither can I take you with me now. It would seem like murder. Die where and how you like. But, excuse me—I must be going."

At the mention of the letter she had started back; but now she smiled once more and pressed herself against him with renewed ardour.

"But, dearest," she whispered, "don't think any more about that stupid plan."

"What stupid plan?"

"Why, about death and dying."

"What?"

"Don't you see," she whispered, stroking his cheeks, radiantly confident of conquest, "it would be utterly ridiculous to die now? Why should we? Just when we have got each other again? It seems to me that we shall begin to live now for the first time."

In blank astonishment he gazed at her. He had been so accustomed during the last twenty-four hours to regard himself and her as destined that night for death that he could hardly grasp the ignoble course her lips proposed. When he had grasped it he was threatened by one of his old furious rages. The blood-red mist floated before his eyes, and a voice cried within him, "End it."

"Wretched woman," he said, and caught at his breast-pocket.

She noticed his action, and saw the blue gleam of steel flash towards her. In deadly terror she shrieked for help. Before he had time to cock the pistol she had fled into the dressing-room, crying in a shrill, piercing voice—

"Help! Murder! Help!"

"Beast!" he muttered, and put the weapon down on the writing-table.

For a moment he stood irresolute, not sure whether to attempt escape or let himself be found where he was. Then he raised his eyes and saw standing on the dark threshold a tall, ghost-like form. It was Ulrich, and the woman was grovelling at his feet. Leo felt no shock of surprise.

"Now he knows!" was his first thought—"knows." And he wondered coolly how he would take it.

"Speak," said Ulrich, in a voice that was strange to Leo. "What are you doing here?" It seemed as if he grew taller and taller.

"Speak," said the strange voice, a second time.

"He was going to murder me!" sobbed Felicitas, kneeling before him in her nakedness. "Because—I—wouldn't do—what he wanted, he was going to murder me——"

Leo came a step nearer. His hands itched to strangle her before she could lie further. But Ulrich's eyes petrified him.

"Don't listen to her," he stammered. "But shoot me down; here I am."

The figure in the door began to reel, and a long bony hand was stretched out to the wall for support.

"Can he survive it?" thought Leo, in readiness to catch him if he fell. But Ulrich, with an effort, pulled himself together.

"Not here," he said; "we will meet at daylight!"

"Where?"

"On the Isle of Friendship, Leo."

"Very well, on the Isle of Friendship." And he turned to the door.

Outside old Minna was waiting in the darkness.

"Make haste, sir," he heard her say; "there are people moving about already down below."

XXXIX

A PALE, snowy twilight came through the window. Leo sprang up in bed where he had slept for four hours, in his clothes, like a dead man.

He extinguished the lamp which smoked, still burning near him on the table. Now it seemed to be almost night again. It was a quarter-past seven by his watch. "At eight it will be daylight," he thought. "If I start then, I shall be early enough."

Then slowly, as one recalls a wild dream, he went over again the events of the past night. Why had she not turned him back at the garden gate, when she knew Ulrich was in the house? For a moment he entertained the mad suspicion that she had laid a trap for him, but the next, he rejected it as unlikely.

He had not quite regained clear consciousness. His forehead ached, his eyes burned. A confused medley of thoughts and images passed through his brain; and then there leapt up within him an illuminating flame of certainty—

"Now he knows!"

Now he knows—he knows. It was all over with hypocrisy, lying, and evasion, nervous anxiety, and enervating desire. The long corrupting process to which his inner man had been subjected had reached its finality. Once more he might draw a deep free breath from his sorely weighted lungs.

He thrust open the window, and breathed in long draughts of the snow-laden air, which braced and refreshed him. His mood was now so clear and calm, that he felt as if body and soul had been purified and hallowed in that white mantle of snow.

The flakes descended in whirling columns. They seemed to push and struggle with each other as to which should first reach the earth.

They hid the yard in impenetrable clouds. Only here and there a gable or a stable window peeped out on the battle-field of snow-flakes.

He had taken farewell already of his belongings; had consigned to ruin with rage and scorn the heritage that had come down to him from his forefathers.

But to-day it was with calm resignation that he relinquished everything that his heart had so long held dear. A supreme indifference to all that had happened, and was yet to happen, overcame him. Even the wrong that he had done Ulrich no longer deeply affected him.

He would let him shoot him dead, and then *basta!* But suppose he should miss! What if his hand trembled. It could not, it must not. To outlive this day was unthinkable. He would receive the sanctifying bullet in silence, in grateful silence that he had been allowed to die an honourable death.

He drew down his case of pistols, oiled and tested the triggers, and put his eye to their mouths. On the butt end of one he found the little cross, scratched with a knife, the mark which he had made years ago to distinguish the pistol which had killed Rhaden from the others.

Then he loaded it, and before doing so he held the bullets in his palm and passed his other hand almost affectionately over the leaden pellets.

Slowly the day advanced. One thing he had to do which would be more difficult than it had been yesterday, and that was to take a mute farewell of his loved ones. The day before he had slunk into the house like a thief in the night, to-day he could scarcely resist the longing to press openly a parting kiss on his mother's brow. But she was still asleep, and as he went by her door he stroked the latch with his hand. That was his good-bye.

The only person he met face to face was Hertha. He found her in the dining-room as he came into it, to get a drink of something warming. She wore a white smock over her dark house-dress, and the lamplight which struggled with the dawn shone on her smooth hair.

She started at the sound of his morning greeting, for it was a long time since such a thing had happened as his appearing at breakfast.

"Up already, Hertha?"

"Yes, of course," she gasped. "I have been going to the milking again lately."

And then she pressed her elbows nervously against her sides, as if she was afraid that she had said too much, and cast her eyes shyly along the table.

"That is capital," he said; "will you pour me out a cup of coffee?"

"When the water boils," she answered, and busied herself with the flame of the spirit-lamp.

He sat down opposite her, and as he looked at her he thought, "There sits one who should have been my housewife."

And he held a silent burial. All the hopes of his youth, his dreams of happiness, his unspoken wish for wife and children, and the small dear comforts of a home, all that was best and purest within him, that he had imagined dead long ago, at this moment, when he was conscious it still lived, he laid in a solemn grave.

She brewed the coffee, and the porcelain filter trembled in her hand. Then she handed him a steaming cup.

He drank it, and she began to move towards the door.

"Don't go, my child," he said, eager to enjoy to the full these few minutes. "Stay with me."

She paused irresolute, her eyes wide with wonder, then she slowly went back to her place.

He did not speak to her again, and for something to do, she cut bread and butter.

The clock struck eight and he sprang up. "Now for it, old boy. Now for it."

At the door he stopped and looked back. She was sitting turned away from him, her head a little on one side, her industrious hands fallen idly in her lap.

And now the anguish of parting unmanned him. He came behind her, and bending her head backwards he laid his hand on her forehead with a gentle caress.

He saw the colour deepen in her cheeks, and her two rows of regular white teeth shining between her anxiously parted lips, and he looked into her large frightened eyes.

"My dear child," he said; "my dear, dear child."

Their eyes melted into each other, and from the depths of her breast came a short gurgling sob.

"You have been very good to me, child," he went on, "and you would have done still more for me if I had let you. And in return I have been bearish and rough to you. Forgive me. I would like to make up for it, but it may not be—may not be. Stay with my mother, dear; you are the only one who can keep a cool head."

He kissed her rigid lips softly and hurried away.

Outside the falling snow hung like a thick veil over the fields. Not a breath of wind, not a sound came out of the distance. The trees became blurred in the dense, silent dance of the flakes. They looked almost as if they were tied up in bags, so entirely were they wrapped in the snowy foam.

Beneath his feet the fine new snow rose over his boots at every step and flew before him in little powdery clouds. Road and path were quite lost to view, and one had to grope one's way over the ground step by step.

Leo felt warm under his heavy cloak, and the weight of his case of pistols oppressed him too. He opened his mouth, and swallowed

as many of the flying crystals as he could catch, for his throat burned. Then he took off his cap and let the cooling flakes fall refreshingly on his bare head.

"Would he be there?" he asked himself, and the thought of a personal meeting alarmed him more than the prospect of death.

"My God, what sort of a meeting will it be?" he stammered half-aloud, and grew hot all over.

They would have to speak to each other. They could not glare from their respective posts and then fall on one another without a word like two red Indians; and suddenly in a flash the thought came to him—

"Suppose you are so bad that he declines to waste powder and shot on you."

He held his breath for a moment almost petrified with shame. Then he roused himself and ran with all his might through the reeds, and over the groaning ice to the spot where "finis" was to be written on everything. On the frozen little bay, whereby it was alone possible to reach the island, he found footprints which must have been quite freshly made, though the snow had half covered them up already.

This first sign of his friend's waiting presence made his heart rise to his throat.

He tore on, following the foot-marks up the steep incline to the clearing which was lost to sight in the ever-thickening snowstorm. For a moment anxiety at what was to come made him giddy. Death was mere child's play compared with the inevitable conversation that must precede it. He leaned against a tree to get his breath, and it seemed to him that instead of the white flakes a shower of red and blue flames were falling around him. And then he made a last great effort to shake off all cowardice, and stepped on to the open space to offer his heart as a target to his friend.

But he could see no sign of him. On all sides the white noiseless tumult, the dark interior of the temple making the one shadow in the milky lightness, but nowhere any trace of a human figure.

He walked the length of the clearing, took a rapid glance in passing at the two statues, spied into the thicket, hunted at the back of the temple, and at last he found him.

First of all his foot struck against a case of pistols like his own, and then he saw lying stretched out at the foot of the sacrificial stone the outline of a man's figure already half covered with snow. With a cry he darted to his side, raised him into an upright position in his arms, and wiped the snow off his face. It was like the face of a corpse. The eyes were shut, the lips colourless, and his skin as Leo touched it felt deathly cold against his caressing hands. Half out of his mind with a dread fear, he pressed his ear listening against the

motionless chest. A slight, irregular tremour told him that there was still life in the body.

And as his fear was conquered, a great passion of all-powerful, all-healing tenderness came over him with the force of an avalanche, which swept away sin and pain, self-degradation and self-contempt and desire for death by the roots as if they had never been. Triumphantly the joy of the old full and undivided possession of his friend broke forth again at this moment. He would live for him, his only care should be to love and serve him—he would laugh so that he should learn to laugh again; lie at his feet like a faithful dog.

Yes, all this he vowed to do as he felt a new strength brace his limbs and a new hope expand his soul.

Now, at any rate, so long as he hung lifeless in his arms, he belonged to him and no one else, he alone was there to warm and cherish him, and to rub his brow as of old.

He carried him to the temple of friendship, spread his cloak for him to lie upon, and wrapped the corners over his breast; and when he saw that the cloak was not sufficient to cover the long limbs altogether, he wrenched off his coat and wrapped it round his feet.

Then he seated himself upon the temple steps, and pillowing the head gently in his lap he began massaging with his finger-tips forehead and skull in the manner which he had practised from childhood, which only he in the world understood.

But the swoon continued; now and then a slight convulsion ran through Ulrich's frame like a shiver from cold.

"If I could get him warm, he would recover consciousness," thought Leo, and drew the folds of the cloak closer round his limbs.

The flakes descended with monotonous speed, without a hiatus or a pause. Not the tiniest spot did they spare, and the narrow roof of the temple was no shelter from them. They no longer cooled and refreshed, but stung and burned as they fell on his skin. They settled in scores on his thin shirt-sleeves and made little dark rivulets there as their star-like shapes melted. He began to freeze, but he did not mind.

His whole soul was centred on the re-awakening of which Ulrich's face now held out one signal after another. And, at length, his eyes opened. First his gaze was fixed on the distance, then it wandered along the white sleeves which bellied above him, and finally remained riveted on the face bending over him with such keen solicitude. An expression of intense horror slowly dawned on his features. A shudder ran through his limbs, and he made a spasmodic attempt to stand on his legs, but sank back again exhausted. His breast heaved and his hands fumbled for a support.

Leo felt his own breath come faster. Now was his great opportunity.

"Spare yourself," he stammered, "I implore you. I will do nothing to you. Lie still and let me explain everything; only lie still. Afterwards, when you have regained strength, you shall shoot me down. But so long as you are feeling poorly spare yourself, and lie still for pity's sake."

Ulrich's gestures became more composed, and there was a silence.

"Leo!"

Greedily Leo heard his name fall from the beloved lips.

"What, old man, what?"

"Leo, why have you not got on your coat?"

"Oh, never mind my coat."

"Leo, if you . . . Leo, why . . .?"

"Don't ask any questions, child; not now. I am going to tell you all, but not now. Now you must lie quietly here while I go for help."

"No, no. It is best that you should say now, once for all, what you want to say."

"But are you quite sure that you are well enough to bear it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And you will be able to understand?"

"Yes, I shall understand."

"I haven't spoken, Ulrich, because I thought it no good—because I thought you would believe her and not me—and because I wanted to spare her, too. But whether you will believe me or not, whether or not it is her ruin, I will speak now. And I shall not whitewash myself, you may be sure of that."

And then he confessed all, beginning with the first great lie which had been the root of all the evil. He kept back nothing and softened nothing in the rapid brief words which the stress of the moment necessitated his using. It was as if his heart opened and his soul poured out through his veins in streams of blood.

Silent and motionless, with his eyes raised to the ceiling of the temple, Ulrich listened.

Then he seemed to be losing consciousness again, for he became wandering and unintelligible in his speech, and his eyelids dropped. But he had clearly comprehended as far as the intended double suicide. And he had grasped its deepest motive. For, with a mild, melancholy smile, he murmured, "Poor boy." After that he was silent, and lay there with feverish cheeks and dry lips gazing into vacancy from beneath his drooping lids.

Ulrich's only sign of forgiveness was in those two words, "Poor boy." And to these Leo had to cling desperately, now and later in many an hour of suspense, till he could be certain what Fate had in store for him.

With merciless calm the flakes whirled down. There was a cruel and restful peace in their endless descent—a sort of eternal repose, like a silent burying of countless races.

Leo shivered. His shirt was wet through, and a feeling of numbness crept over his stiff arms.

Where should he take the sick man?

Uhlenfelde was nearest, but he recoiled with horror from the idea of delivering him into the woman's hands again. He had him, and he would keep him in defiance of her and the whole world.

A warm glow of new-born energy suffused his limbs. He laid the head of his unconscious friend against the pedestal and sprang to his feet.

And as he looked round him into the white, dripping duskiness, in which everything seemed indistinct and shapeless, the knowledge grew on him, "You live—and you may live."

He put both hands to his brow and staggered above the prostrate form.

It was a happiness that pained. And then he ran off straight to Halewitz to fetch help.

XL

A TIME of heavy trial followed. Ulrich must have carried the germs of typhoid about with him since he left his step-son's sick-bed, and the excitement of that memorable night had developed them into activity. He lay in Leo's study hovering between life and death.

In the first hours after conveying him there, Leo half feared that Felicitas might dispute his right to nursing the patient. But his anxiety on this account proved quite superfluous. The messenger whom he had despatched to Uhlenfelde brought back word that the "gnädiger Frau" had driven to the station early that morning with luggage, and had left no address behind her.

It was with a feeling of release that he threw himself on his knees by the sick-bed, and swore over his friend's thin burning hand a thousand oaths to which he could not give words, but which all meant the same thing: "See, I am my old self again, and so I shall always be!"

His one plan for the future now was to live with him if he lived, and to die with him if he died.

He never left Ulrich's bed. His rest was taken on the floor at its foot, and with cognac and champagne he kept at bay the sleep that was so necessary to his powerful physique, which he would not allow to feel the strain of watching.

He had been morally so cast down and broken by the events of the last few weeks that even now he could hardly believe in reawakened expectations of happiness or hopes for Ulrich's recovery, except by a miracle.

An extra anxiety was added to his burden, when Johanna appeared one evening at the door of the sick-room, and declared that the time had come for her to see Ulrich; God had directed that she should speak with him before he died.

Leo's assurances that the patient would not be able to recognise or understand her were in vain, and as in desperation he tried to remove her from the corridor by force, she began to rave.

The next morning, at her own express wish, she was taken to an asylum.

In these days of trouble and sorrow, when even grandmamma had lost her old nerve and presence of mind, and ran hither and thither, crying and wringing her hands, Hertha was a never-failing prop to lean upon, and an indefatigable helper. She kept the household going in its customary routine, and carried the master's orders to the steward and bailiffs. Even to desolate Uhlenfelde she stretched out a helping hand.

A silent understanding had come about between her and Leo, which was regarded by every one as perfectly natural, for it was an accepted thing that they belonged to each other.

When he met the glance of her bright eyes, hanging questioningly on his lips, he thought, "She has suffered, so she will be able to forgive."

But first Ulrich's recovery, and the rest would come right of itself.

The recovery came.

In the middle of February Ulrich awoke to new consciousness, though for weeks afterwards he was too weak to follow any consecutive train of thought. He seemed to have lost in a great measure his grasp on the past, and he was as grateful as a child when he was helped out in remembering things.

With the return of his mental powers a certain restlessness was apparent in him, of a purely physical character, but which evidently led his mind back to the contemplation of the gaps in a psychic puzzle. He appeared anxious to ask questions, to probe and search into matters, but, not having the courage, lapsed into prolonged and silent brooding.

Leo watched the process with growing uneasiness. An explanation was out of the question, yet every day it became more and more imperative.

Early in March the doctor, after a private talk with the convalescent, urged the necessity of a change of six or eight weeks to a Southern climate. He also insisted that it was most important that this change should precede the return to Uhlenfelde.

Who should accompany him? Certainly not Herr von Sellenthin. Such a thing was not to be thought of. The poor, overtaxed brain must rest, and that was only possible with strangers. Friends in such cases were poison.

Leo said no more.

The next day, a young doctor without a practice arrived from Königsberg, who was delighted to undertake the case and travel with Ulrich, which, as he freely confessed, would be a lift to him financially.

The parting between the friends was gentle and affectionate, and, on the surface, without significance. In it, there was on one side

the dumb appeal, "Forgive me," and on the other the unspoken assurance, "I have forgiven you."

Week after week went by. Leo worked with almost superhuman zeal, for now the supervision of the Uhlenfelde estate, as well as his own, was on his shoulders.

He thought of his former mistress without bitterness or self-reproach, though he was sometimes exercised to know what had become of her. One day, scanty news of her reached him in an unexpected and indirect way.

He called on Pastor Brenckenberg with the object of asking his pardon for his roughness to him at their last interview, and then the old man, who had gradually got over his rancour, told him that his son, "the rascal," had met the Baroness von Kletzingk in Berlin. She had looked the same as usual, had not been in the least embarrassed, and had overwhelmed him with questions.

"And there's something else to tell you," continued the pastor. "You really did my boy a good turn, after all. It is true that he has been expelled from his Corps, but that won't do him much harm. He has been a different creature since that correction you administered to him. He has given up loafing and getting into debt, and he is now earning his bread and working steadily for his exam. So pardon me, Fritzchen, and let me thank you. I behaved like an old ass!"

Leo shook his hand laughingly. Then he pondered on what he had heard about Felicitas, and hoped that she was not playing the adventuress in Berlin.

A report of Ulrich came every week. At first the young doctor wrote, and then he wrote himself, a few, faint, hurried lines, and on these his friend was obliged to build his hopes.

Slowly Leo's soul was purged of its gnawing suspicions and its anxious presentiments of evil which had been so habitual to it of late. He regained his self-confidence, and at the same time spurts of the quaint cynicism and noisy gaiety which so well become those doughty giants on the east of the Elbe. This showed that his wounds were healing, and his temperament recovering its normal healthiness.

It was on a grey, still morning in the second week of May that Leo came in ravenous from his early ride to join the others at breakfast. The glass doors stood wide open, letting in draughts of the soft rainy air. He fancied that he detected in the three pairs of eyes raised to his an unwonted flash of excitement.

"Why are you all making such mysterious faces?" he asked.

His mother looked away and smiled. Elly glanced down at her

lap and smiled too. Hertha kept her eyes fixed on his face with complete frankness.

Then he caught sight of an envelope lying beside his coffee-cup. It was addressed in Ulrich's handwriting, but bore no postmark. His heart leapt as he read—

"DEAR OLD BOY,

"I came home last night, and I am expecting you. Love to all your people,

"ULRICH."

Because he did not wish to betray his emotion, he stood silently behind his chair, and crumpled the paper in his hand. Each one in turn came up to him quietly and congratulated him.

"Children," he said, "his house is empty and desolate now. He has no one but us. Help me to make him welcome here, so that he may look on it as his home. Will you help me, all three of you?"

"Of course we will, my son," said his mother, and stroked his arm.

"And do you agree, Hertha?"

She looked at him with wide, calm eyes, and nodded. He took her hand and mutely thanked her; then he ate and drank, and counted the minutes.

Soon he was making his way streamwards over rain-drenched paths. All round him, in hedge and field, buds and shoots were bursting forth into their spring glory, and within him as he went along a voice kept up the jubilant cry, "Now he belongs to me entirely, and no one else."

But when he stood aloft on the dyke, and saw below him the bijou turrets of Uhlenfelde rising in their coquettish smartness against the sky, a fear began to creep into his heart.

They had been built for her, and where was she? Perhaps knocking about the world abandoned and degraded, while he, unpunished, might dare to set his foot in the house which he had helped to desecrate.

"But what of that?" he laughed, and stretched his strong limbs primed like steel. "Health and happiness must be snatched when they come your way, at any cost. What good to cry over spilt milk?"

And he struck out vigorously with the oars. The Isle of Friendship, in its May raiment of pale green and gold, seemed to peep admiringly at its own reflection in the mirror-like water.

"That saved us," he thought, and, in passing, looked out for a

glimpse of the temple which the foliage was not yet umbrageous enough to hide.

As the boat crunched on the Uhlenfelde strand, panic seized him again, and he entered the courtyard breathing in short gasps like an asthmatic.

But with an effort he set his teeth and collected himself. Ulrich had seen him coming, and was in the hall to receive him. The subdued light of a cloudy day fell on his serious, rigid face, which the spring sunshine of the south had toned to a yellowish brown.

Leo was conscious that he trembled; he would have liked to fly into his arms only he did not dare. The immovable face held him back. Instead he stretched out both his hands and murmured a conventional "How are you?"

A gleam of melancholy tenderness passed over Ulrich's features. "My boy," he said, biting his lips; "my dear old boy."

And then he led him into the garden salon, where a solitary coffee-cup stood on a side table.

Leo cast a shy glance to the left in the direction of Lizzie's sanctum. The door into the boudoir was closed and the key gone. The whole house seemed void and deadly quiet, as if it contained no living creature except the master.

In a corner of the window was the couch with an armchair drawn up close to it, and a little table with ash-tray and cigarette-box. That was where Felicitas had thrown herself down that autumn afternoon when she had first begun to stir up old memories.

Leo thought of this, and felt a slight repugnance when Ulrich asked him to sit down there.

The room from floor to ceiling seemed haunted with shameful pictures of what had been.

"The winter crops are thriving," began Ulrich.

Leo hesitated before answering. In this very natural remark of a landowner who has returned home after a long absence, he traced an evasion.

"Yes, they are all right," he said, constrained.

"And you have looked after Uhlenfelde's interests; accept my warmest thanks, old boy."

"Don't mention it," replied Leo, refusing the hand held out to him. "Your work-people are used to managing for themselves."

"Certainly. That's true," said Ulrich. "But, nevertheless, it is well that they should feel the hand of a master over them."

"I wonder what he means," thought Leo, still at a loss and perplexed by the immovable, solemn face opposite him. Their friendship, their old, exuberant, grand friendship; what had become of it?

A dim desire awoke in Leo to play the fool to put an end to this

constraint. He felt as if he could stand on his head, dance and whoop, or throw himself at his feet, kiss his hands, and cry, "Forgive, forgive."

Yet all *was* forgiven.

In this man's calm, composed glance, there was not a shadow of reproach, nothing but an affectionate compassion.

"Tell me about yourself, Ulrich," he asked, stuttering. "Are you satisfied with your progress? Do you feel quite well now?"

"Yes," said Ulrich, "I am very well."

There was a pause.

Outside the rain fell in warm, soft torrents, and the soil greedily absorbed the moisture. Strings of grey pearls hung on the young green of the twigs, and the half-unfurled leaves expanded, and glistened in the invigorating shower-bath. Everywhere young life and the promise of a fertile spring. But the two men who loved each other better than anything else in the world, felt as if a breath of autumn and dying things hovered about them.

"You know," Ulrich began, "we have much to talk over, old boy. We must come to a clear understanding about our position with regard to each other. I mean, our old friendship."

A quiet, iron resolve made his face like an inscrutable mask. It was as if this sickly, much-wronged soul had fought its last struggles and come off victor. Something of Ulrich's calm was at this minute communicated to Leo. He felt that, happen what might, it would be in accordance with the requirements of their two inmost natures.

"It is well that we have allowed so much time to elapse, since that night," Ulrich went on. "I have been able to think over things, and I believe that I have chosen the right path for us to pursue. The sad story you related to me on the Isle of Friendship has since been corroborated in every particular by Felicitas herself."

Leo started up. "You have seen her?" he stammered.

Ulrich nodded gravely. "She wrote to me about—about the divorce, as you may suppose. And so I went to look her up. I did not like the idea of leaving the poor thing to her own devices in case she should go altogether to the bad."

Leo could not help feeling a jealous pang. Ulrich spoke of the woman so gently. Would he deal as tenderly with him?

"But when I found her looking fresh and gay, as if relieved of a burden——"

"You really found her like *that?*" Leo asked eagerly.

Ulrich bowed his head, and an ironical smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"Then I saw plainly how much I had been to blame. I ought never to have offered my hand to a healthy young creature, made in

every fibre for love and pleasure; I, a fragile unsound subject, hardly capable of dragging through life alone. I hope that she will be happy now. I do not love her. I ceased to care for her the day I knew—— But we won't speak of the boy. Still, no one shall cast a stone at her."

Leo breathed more freely. Ulrich evidently did not regret her, and this shadow no longer lay between them.

"To pass on to ourselves," said Ulrich, leaning back in his chair with a gesture denoting mental fatigue. His features lost their expression of strained severity, and as his mouth opened two lines of pain shot up into his sunken cheeks.

"Another bad quarter of an hour," Leo thought, whose hopes of a happy issue were now high again, "and then we shall be on quite the old footing."

"Do you remember, my dear boy," Ulrich went on, with his eyes fixed distressfully on vacancy, "the day of your return, when we sat and drank together at the Prussian Crown? You said to me then that my marriage would cost us our friendship. I wouldn't believe you at the time, but now I see that you were a thousand times right."

"How do you mean right?" stammered Leo, feeling a cold shiver of anxiety run through him.

"You mustn't reproach me, dear boy. I am punishing myself more than I punish you. I love you as much as ever I did. I would pour out my heart's blood for you—but I can't associate with you any more."

"Ulrich!" cried Leo; "then you haven't forgiven me after all?"

Ulrich looked pained. "What do you call forgiving?" he said. "The one woman in the world, whom I as your friend had no right to touch, I made my wife. So I think we are quits. If it had come to shooting between us that day, and you had sent me the same way as her first husband, I would have died stroking and blessing your hand, dear boy. And then you talk of forgiving!"

Leo had staggered to his feet. He stretched out his hand as if he would seize and hold his friend fast before his soul slipped out of his grasp for ever.

"What you propose is madness," he exclaimed.

"No, dear boy. I should like to explain it all thoroughly to you. I have rehearsed a long speech, but I cannot somehow exactly recall it now. God knows it was my firm intention to let the past lie buried. But I can't alter my nature, and you know how I take things to heart, and when I do, must speak of them. But leaving me out of the question. You take life differently, less seriously. Yet how could you endure to come in and out here, when the very walls speak to you of the past? I noticed just now

how you glanced at that door. It seemed to you that she must be coming through it. I have done with her, and so, it is to be hoped, have you—but, all the same, her ghost fills this place, and you feel it as much as I do."

"With time that would wear off," Leo murmured, becoming more and more dispirited.

"I doubt it," replied Ulrich. "It could never wear off with us. We should have had to be brought up differently, born of different parents, and with other blood pumped into our veins. As we are, our sense of honour, our manliness, would constantly be in revolt. Day by day we should become more discomfited, till at last we should end by laying at each other's door our loss of self-respect. No, that shall not be. It would be too great a strain on our old friendship. Think of our two fathers. They were fond of each other, God knows. But if what has happened to us had happened to them, they would have both cut their throats without asking who was to blame and who wasn't. Say, am I not right?"

Leo was silent, and thought to himself, "Thus he casts me off."

It seemed to him that all the new purpose and strength that he had built up within him, all the tenderness and truth were falling in ruins. Nothingness stretched before him.

"The best thing I can do, then," he said sadly, "is to pack my bundle as quickly as may be and go back to America."

Ulrich came and laid his hand on his shoulder. "No, you won't do that, dear boy," he said. "Look over there across the stream. There lie your acres; your fields full of flourishing rye; the turnips waiting to be transplanted; even the wheat springing above the soil. And now God's blessed gift of rain has come to make all green and fruitful. You are responsible for every tiny growth, so don't talk of running away to waste and rot where you can do no good and reap no harvest."

"If you give me up," said Leo, bitterly, "nothing is any good."

"But I am not going to give you up. I shall watch over you and yours from afar, and rejoice in all that gives you joy. I shall count the ears of corn in your fields, and your children I will cherish in my heart as if they were my own."

"My children?" muttered Leo.

Ulrich smiled. "Do you imagine I haven't kept my eyes open?" he asked. "I don't know whether you feel yet that you have come through the furnace of what has been, sufficiently cleansed. . . . But take my advice and don't keep the dear girl waiting too long. Be happy; you have good cause; for *you* it is spring, inside and out."

Leo felt tears start to his eyes. He turned away, and put his hands over his face.

"And what about you, Ulrich?" he asked, controlling his emotion.

A gleam of patient hopelessness shot over the tired sallow face, like the presage of a tranquil death.

"Oh, I," he said; "I have not much more to live for. You mustn't worry about me. I have done what I could, and I accept as a special grace what is left to me. Now, give me your hand. My most earnest, heartfelt thanks are yours. Good-bye." For a moment they lay in each other's arms. "Be brave, old fellow," urged Ulrich. "After all, we have only reached the point at which we stood the day you came home."

"Once more, forgive me," Leo half whispered, as if ashamed of the request; and then he rushed to the door.

The soft rain was still falling. A warm wind swept it over the landscape in silvery showers, and from between the banks of cloud a faint golden light shone down on the fragrant earth. Wild ducks quacked as they wallowed in the slime of the pond. In the branches of the blossoming hawthorns, finches and tomtits chased each other, singing and chirruping. The whole of Nature seemed in the humour for jesting.

As if coming from an open grave, Leo faced life again in its changed aspect, and his heart was very sore. There dawned on his mind a sense of the utter uselessness of struggling against the fate which governed so inexorably the human race. His brain was too tired to reason it out clearly, but the bare idea overawed him. Then something began to rise up in revolt within him against the destiny to which he had submitted, without even a show of resistance, and against the prolonging of the paralysing influence of his old sin. The sacrifice to which he had consented with such weak humility would hang that sin round his neck like a millstone for evermore.

There was his boat, receiving for the last time the hospitality of the white sands of Uhlenfelde. For the last time his strong arms pushed it out into the stream. The last time! The pebbles crunched under the grinding keel, and its nose ploughed gaily into the sparkling ripples. Was it really the last time that his foot would touch Uhlenfelde soil? Half hesitating, he jumped into the boat and fixed the oars, with an exclamation of anger. What he had agreed to was absurd—nay, worse, it was a positive crime, a crime against himself and against his friend.

And then, when in mid-current he turned to take a farewell look at Uhlenfelde, he saw at one of the turret windows Ulrich's face. It was unmistakable, framed in its light, scanty goat's beard, and with its great, hollow eyes. His heart leapt. It would seem as if Ulrich had mounted to the tower with the purpose of beckoning him back.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" he cried jubilantly, and with a frantic pull began to turn the boat round.

But no, Ulrich made no sign; on the contrary, he drew back quickly, as if he did not wish to be seen.

Disappointed, Leo rowed on, yet he felt distinctly happier. At the sight of his friend, in his great, shy, compassionate love, watching him, half hidden by the curtains, there came back to Leo, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, all his new-born strength and energy, which he had felt recently thrilling through body and soul; the old glorious, mighty, unquenchable confidence in conquest, which had been his inheritance and had ruled his life from the beginning, till a woman had shamefully filched it from him.

He jerked the oars out of his hands, drew himself erect, and stretching his clenched fists towards Ulrich, he called out laughingly across the water—

"I'll win you back yet—see if I don't!"

The glimmer of a face vanished from the window opposite. But Leo sat down in the boat again, and guided it swiftly to the Halewitz shore—high festival in his heart.

THE END

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LITERARY WORLD.—"After a perusal of *Regina*, we are constrained to wonder why in the name of fortune a book so powerful has had to wait such a long time for a translator. . . . *Regina* is not a book belonging to any school. It is the product of a mind strong enough to reject all neighbourly props; and it could only have been written by a realist who has not been unwise enough to depart altogether from the poetry of romance."

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